

キノの旅 II

the Beautiful World

時雨沢恵二

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電撃文庫

t h e B e a u t i f u l W o r l d



時雨沢恵一

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-the Beautiful World-
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by Keiichi Sigsawa

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キノの旅Ⅱ

— the Beautiful World —



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The Story of a Sniper –Fatalism–

Once upon a time, there was a deep, deep forest.

Nearby was a hill. A hill with a view of the whole forest.

On the hill was a sniper. A sniper lying on his stomach, curled up with a long sniper persuader.

The sniper scrutinized every dark and distant inch of the forest through his scope.

Suddenly, something stirred by the beautiful lake in the forest.

The sniper spied a man splashing and frolicking in the water, completely naked.

The sniper lay completely still for a time, but soon took aim precisely at the slightly short but handsome man in the lake. One pull of the trigger and a bullet would be fired at terrifying speed, taking the man's life. The lake would turn

red.

The sniper composed himself and—

“Don’t shoot.”

He heard a clear, beautiful voice from above the back of his head. Startled, he slowly looked up. There stood a woman.



She was a stunning woman in fashionable clothes and shimmering black hair. In her right hand was a large-caliber revolver. It was pointed precisely at the sniper's head.

"Sorry for scaring you. But don't move. It'd be a waste of bullets and gunfluid if I missed," said the woman.

The sniper slowly responded. "Why are you doing this?"

The woman replied with a smile, revolver still trained on his head, "Because you killed the people in the forest. The families, friends, and lovers of your victims hired me to kill you."

"In other words," said the sniper. "You're here to kill me?"

The woman nodded.

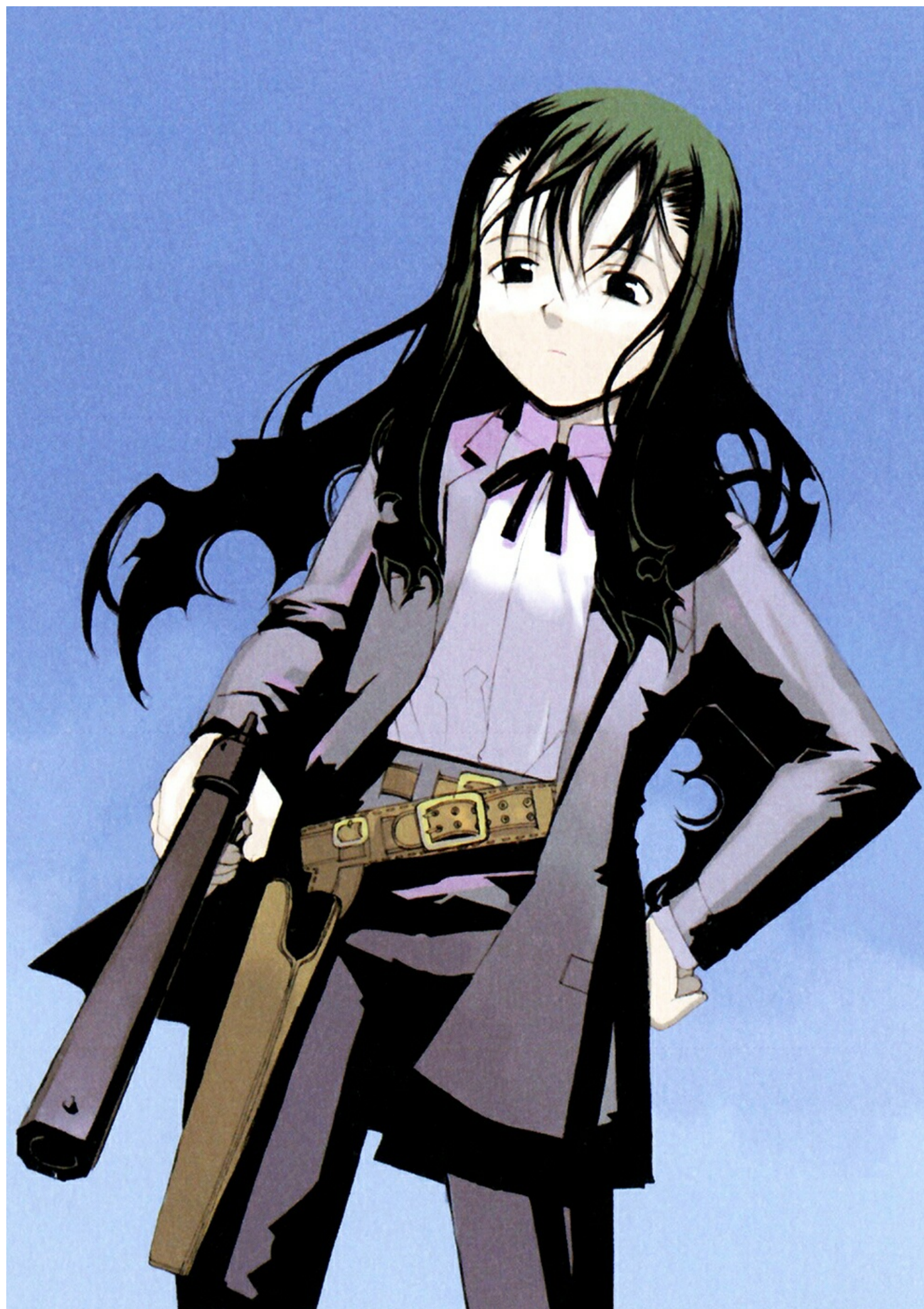
The sniper spoke again, "Then why aren't you pulling the trigger?"

An uncomfortable look rose to the woman's face. "That's a great question," she said, and began to explain. "Actually, right after I took this job, a different group of people from the same country matched the first group's pay and asked me to *not* kill you. A lot of people wanted you dead, I can tell you, but at the same time, just as many people said that you avenged them, got rid of trouble for them, helped them get their inheritance faster, put a terminal patient out of their misery, or took care of pests, et cetera. To them, you were fortune incarnate."

"I see."

"So I wondered what I should do with you the whole way here. I'm still wondering."

"If that's the case..."



“Yes?”

“Then give me an order. So far, I’ve shot every person I’ve seen. But from now on, I’ll only shoot one person out of a certain number—a number that I’ll leave up to you. I will do as you decide. Now fewer people will die in this forest, but never none.”

“That’s an excellent idea.”

The woman decided on a number and told the sniper. The number was very complex and required difficult calculations, so it will not be written down here.

Without shooting the sniper, the woman went down the hill and into the forest.

The man was still wading in the lake. The moment he spotted the woman, he rushed to her side—still naked—on the verge of tears.

“What took you so long, Master? You almost had me thinking something had gone wrong!”

The woman seemed a little taken aback, but told the man that his job was done and that he should put his clothes back on.

The man scrambled into his clothes and asked the woman, “in any case, seeing as we’re both still alive and well, I suppose you’ve killed the target?”

“No.”

The man was stunned. So stunned, in fact, that he strung both his legs into the same pant leg and wobbled to the ground.

The woman explained what had happened.

“B-but doesn’t that mean he could pull the trigger on us any moment?” the man pointed out, but the woman simply strode over to her car—a small, old piece of rust that looked just about ready to explode. The man hurried after her.

In the car, the man asked, “What now, Master? Without his head, we’re not going to get the bounty. And you haven’t simply left him to do his business, which means we’re not going to get the other fee.”

“I know,” the woman said with an elegant smile, starting the engine. “But I have the down payments from both clients. We’ll take off with those.”

The man seemed to want to say something, but the woman ignored him and hit the gas.

A large bullet came zooming at where the car had been only a moment ago. It hit a tree instead and severed the trunk.

The car continued.

The forest is still there today. The sniper is still on the hill.





What is right? Who is right?

Is something right? Is someone right?

–What is ‘right’?–

*

Prologue: In the Middle of the Desert • B – Beginner’s Luck • B–

It was raining.

Sheets of rain pounded the ground without end.

All around was nothing but mist and rain. The drumming of the droplets showed no sign of ceasing. It was a dark afternoon.

Someone stood in the heavy rain.

A young human, about 15 years of age.

The human’s long brown coat was only enough to shield her body from the droplets. Rain soaked her short, black hair, which clung to her forehead and sent water streaming down her face. The human stuck out her tongue to lick at the water on her lips.

“Not every day you see this much rain in a place like this. It’s really strange,” someone said. The voice sounded like that of a young boy, but it seemed to be disembodied.

Suddenly, the human in the brown coat looked into the sky.

The rain splattered against her face and shot into her mouth. Water flowed down her cheeks like tears.

“Aha hah! Hah hah hah hah!”

Without warning, the human burst into laughter. With her face to the sky, mouth wide open, and arms stretched toward the heavens.

“Aha hah! Hah hah hah hah!”

The human laughed joyously, spinning as though in a dance. Her coat fluttered like a long dress.

“Aha hah! Hah hah hah hah! Hah hah hah hah hah!”

The human laughed and danced for some time before pointing a finger at a place beyond the sheets of rain.

“Well?” she asked.

There was no answer. The human spoke again.

“What do you think, Hermes?”

This time, she received a response.

“Not much of it, I guess.”

“Not much of it?”

The disembodied reply came a moment’s pause later.

“This doesn’t make things very exciting for me. So I guess I feel a mix of emotions.”

“Aha hah hah! Hah hah hah hah!”

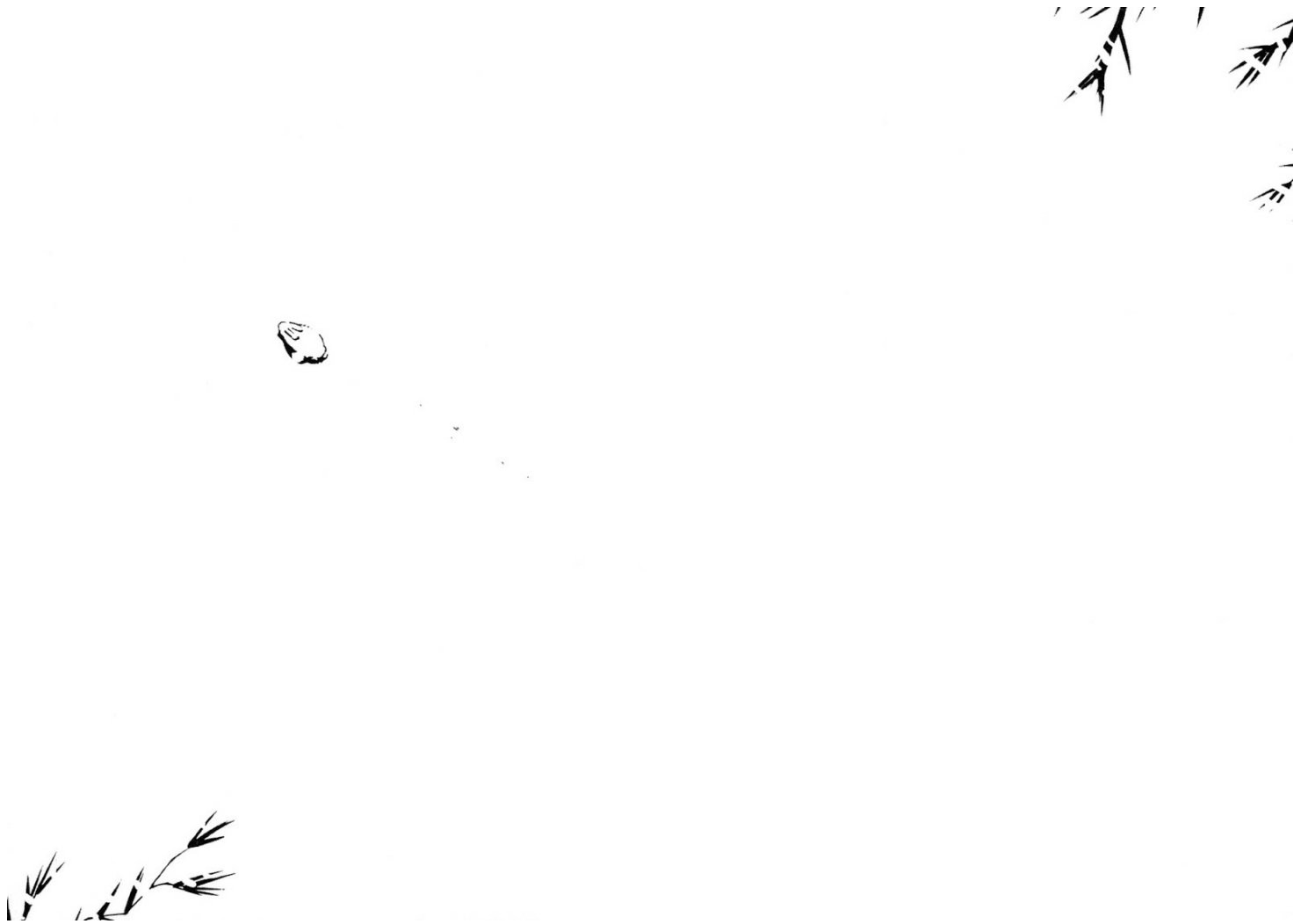
The human looked up once again and laughed.

“What are you going to do now, Kino?” asked the voice.

“I don’t know. What *should* I do? Keep wondering what to do?” the human called Kino replied before bursting into laughter again.

The rain showed no sign of letting up anytime soon.

Chapter 1: A Story of Feeding off of Others –I Want to Live–



The forest was covered in snow.

The blanket of white had been heavy on the plants in the woods all winter long. Tall coniferous trees stood over the wintry world.

The sky peered through between the branches, dark and covered with low grey clouds ready to pour more snow at any moment. The sun shone feebly.

It was quiet. Completely silent, save for the occasional sound of snow slipping off branches. Not even the wind whistled.

Out of nowhere, a wild rabbit emerged. It was completely white save for the ears.

The rabbit slowly moved, leaving faint pawprints in its wake. Then it stopped with a twitch of the ears and head, then resumed moving.

The rabbit repeated the actions for some time before suddenly freezing. Its

ears quivered. A glowing red dot appeared on its forehead.

In the same forest was a human.

A person wearing a cloaked winter coat and pants that covered even the feet. The person was wearing a fur-rimmed hat and a one-eye goggle with a yellow lens. A face warmer extended from the neck to cover the rest of her face.

The person sat against a tree with one leg up. There was a hand persuader in her grip, held with both hands between the knees. The persuader was an automatic model with a narrow frame and a harmonica-shaped suppressor. A red light suddenly emerged from the small hole under the muzzle. A laser sight for aiming. It was pointed straight at the rabbit's head.

With breaths rising in white puffs, the person slowly pulled the trigger. The persuader clicked.

In the blink of an eye, blood spurted from the rabbit's head.

The rabbit trembled and fell, completely lifeless. Blood dyed its white fur red and melted the snow piled under its body.

In the forest was a straight path lined with cut wood. It was covered in snow and frozen.

A motorrad stood in the middle of the road.

There was a sturdy luggage rack behind the seat of the motorrad, but instead of luggage, a lone sack was hanging from it.

The motorrad had been modified for snowy conditions. Sharp arms attached to either side of the tires provided extra grip. At the ends of the arms were footrests with small skis fixed underneath. They would prevent the motorrad from tipping even if the tires slipped.

"I got it, Hermes."

Someone emerged from the woods with the rabbit, holding it upside-down by its tied legs. A covered holster was stuck diagonally through the front of her belt.

"Great work, Kino," the motorrad called Hermes cheered. "Now you won't have to resort to rations."

Kino nodded, put the rabbit in the sack, and tied it to the luggage rack.

She pulled off her goggles and bandanna, then lowered her face warmer. Kino was in her mid-teens, with short black hair and fair features.

Casually wiping off sweat, she fixed her hat and replied, "Let's go back, then. I'd feel sorry if I left them to die now."

"You'd feel sorry?" asked Hermes.

"Yeah. Apologetic."

"To whom?" Hermes asked again.

Kino replied, "To the rabbit."

She started Hermes. The sound of the engine broke the silence in the woods. Putting on her goggles and face warmer, Kino put her feet on the skis and left.

A newish truck sat by a corner in the white road. Snow buried half the tires and the bottom of the chassis, rendering it completely immobile. Another thick layer was piled on the roof.

A large tent stood a slight distance from the truck, on the border between the road and the woods. The tent was dome-shaped with the snow around it cleared.

The hum of an engine broke the silence, and soon Kino and Hermes arrived.

A man half-crawled to the tent entrance and peered outside. He was in his thirties with a hollow face, wild hair, and a messy mop of a beard. His winter clothes were equally messy.

When Kino pulled the rabbit out of the sack and held it up to the man, he looked up at it with a grin and pulled back inside. Then, two other men poked their heads out the door. A bespectacled man in his twenties and a man in his forties with a sprinkling of grey hair. Both were emaciated, but the sight of the rabbit brought life to their eyes.

"I'll cook it for you. Let me borrow a pot," said Kino.

The man in his thirties replied, "Just give it to us now. We can eat it raw."

The other men tried to agree, but Kino shook her head. "No. I can't have you

get food poisoning.”

Disappointed, the men brought out two pots—one large and one small—from inside the tent. Kino received them.

“I’ll call for you when I’m done, so get some rest.”

“Right,” said the man in his thirties. “...Kino?”

“Yes?”

He met her gaze. “Thank you.”

Kino gave a faint smile. “It’s too early to be thanking me. But you’re welcome.”

That morning, Kino and Hermes were traveling down the frozen road, the clouds heavy over their heads.

They were making good pace that day thanks to the tire and ski attachments.

Hermes’ luggage rack was laden with not only Kino’s bags, but a winter tent, a sleeping bag, and many other pieces of travel gear.

“Look,” Hermes said suddenly. “A truck.”

Kino slowed down without touching the brake pedal and came to a stop before the buried truck. She shut off the engine and disembarked.

Opening the cover of the holster on her belt, she drew her revolver-type persuader. The persuader’s name was ‘Cannon’.

Just as she approached the truck, Kino noticed the tent beside it. And she met the eyes of the man who had rushed to poke his face out the entrance.

The man was in his thirties with a messy beard. He was staring at Kino in utter shock. She holstered Cannon and spoke.

“Hi there.”

Without a word, the man crawled out of the tent and feebly stood. Behind him were two more faces, both equally shocked by her presence.

The man looked at Kino and Hermes. “Y-you’re a traveler, aren’t you? Do you have any food to spare...?”

"I see what's going on," Hermes said casually.

"I suppose I might. ...How long have you been here?"

"Don't die of shock, all right? Since the beginning of winter."

A hint of surprise rose to Kino's face.

"That's incredible," said Hermes. "Then you've been here for a really long time."

"That's right. The snowfall started a little early this year, and it was a blizzard to boot. We've been tied up here ever since, half-dead."

"It's a good thing you're only half-dead," Hermes said. No one laughed.

"Your truck isn't carrying any food, I suppose," Kino said. The men looked both sad and pained at the question.

"It was, but we finished it all. We didn't leave without any rations, of course, but who knew we'd be stuck here all winter? We should have been more careful. Please, we've been waiting so long! Please spare some food for us. It's only three mouths here," the man pleaded, pointing at the tent. His companions also gave Kino desperate looks.

"I'm begging you," the man said, clasping his hands together. Kino sighed.

"I do have some food, although only rations. Unfortunately, I only travel with enough food to feed myself alone. It's not nearly enough to feed you all."

Their dejection was palpable.

"But," Kino said. They looked up. "I *can* hunt for you. There must be some animals in the area, especially since it's beginning to warm up. And once you have some of your strength back, you'll be able to try pushing your truck out of the snow. Do you have any fuel left?"

"Of course! Then you'll help us?" the man asked, rejoicing. With three sets of eyes and the weight behind them on her shoulders, Kino gave a slight nod.

"Yes. I'll stay here a few days and help you out."

The men were all smiles; they showered Kino with thanks.

"What's your name?" asked the man in his thirties.

“Kino. And this here is Hermes.”

“Kino, eh? Take a look at this,” the man said, producing a small box from his pocket and opening it up for Kino to see. Inside was a ring—made of silver and inlaid with several green gemstones.

“She’ll fetch a fair price, this one. It’s yours. Keep it.”

He held the box out to Kino.

“It’s too early to be thanking me.”

“I insist. Bought it for my wife, but it’s no use to her if I die out here.”

Kino received the box and opened the lid. She scrutinized its contents for a time without expression.

“All right,” she finally said, putting the box in her pocket. “I’ll take it as a reward once I’ve helped you out. I’m only holding on to it for now. Wait here and I’ll go catch some game. I’m leaving my things here, but don’t touch them. Meat will taste much better than my rations.”

Kino unloaded Hermes completely and tied a sack to the luggage rack.

And she left hunting.

Kino got to work on preparing the meal.

She dug a small pit in the snow next to a tree, and started a fire in the pit with a bit of solid fuel, old newspapers, and twigs. She hung the pot from the tree with rope, adjusted its height to match the fire, and scooped up the cleanest snow she could find.

Then, she placed the rabbit on the metal plate she used for target practice. For several seconds, she gazed at the rabbit, then closed her eyes for several more.

A moment of silence. Then she butchered the rabbit.

Kino took off her gloves and exchanged them for a pair of thin rubber ones. She pulled them up all the way to the sleeves of her winter coat.

First, she unfolded her hunting knife and made multiple incisions around the rabbit’s back.

Then she pulled at its skin from the left and right until its neck and the tips of its paws were completely exposed, and cut them off.

The rabbit was reduced to a pink piece of meat much smaller than before.

Kino made a long abdominal incision from the neck to the anus to remove the organs. She washed out the rabbit's empty belly with snow and paper, then lightly rinsed it out.

As for the legs, she made incisions in the connecting areas and broke the joints to remove them. She cut the hind legs in half at the knees, and carved up the torso into smaller bits.

Finally, the rabbit had been turned into pieces of meat fit for a butcher shop.

Kino adjusted the fire, scooped out visible scraps from the water inside, and put in the rabbit chunks. She wiped down her metal plate with snow, then heated it over the fire to disinfect the surface. Once her work was all done, Kino took off her rubber gloves.

The meat was soon ready to eat.

The men came at Kino's call, each staggering from the tent with a plate and cup in hand. They huddled around the fire with haggard faces, eyes alone glinting.

Kino sprinkled salt and pepper on the meat and handed out the pieces. The men simply stared for a moment. Then, tears ran down their dirty cheeks.

"Damn it. Someone pinch me."

"You're not dreaming," said Kino. "Give it a taste. It's not going to vanish."

The men tore the chunks of meat into small pieces with their fingertips and slowly brought them to their mouths. They chewed, chewed, chewed, swallowed, closed their eyes, and sighed.

"Delicious..." the man in his forties muttered, tears running down his face.

"It's good..." the man in his twenties also cried, his hands still busy with the meat. The remaining man said nothing, simply chewing on and on with his eyes closed—savoring the texture of the very real meat in his mouth. "Ahh, been so long since I've had anything this good... It's like a chunk of heaven in my mouth."

A bit salty, though.”

The men laughed through their tears. When they wiped their eyes, some of the dirt came off their faces.

Kino brewed tea with the water she boiled in the other pot and poured each man a cup. Then she handed them several tablets.

“Here. These are vitamins and other medicines. I have plenty of them to spare.”

The youngest of the men beamed. “Thank you. You’re really pulling out all the stops for us, eh?”

“Not going to have any meat, Kino?” asked the man in his thirties.

“I would if there was any left over, but it looks like you’re going to finish it all. I’m fine with my usual,” Kino replied, flashing them her rations—rectangular sticks that looked like pieces of clay.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

“You should give *them* a bit of thanks, too,” Kino said, pointing at a tree branch.

From there hung the fur and torso of the rabbit she had butchered.

The men quickly put their cups and plates down on the snow, clasped their hands, and closed their eyes.

Kino—and Hermes from behind them—watched as the men slowly offered up prayers of thanksgiving.

“Thank you, God, for creating other creatures made of flesh and blood...and forgive us, God, for killing in order to survive...”

The prayers continued for some time. Kino stuffed her rations into her mouth and watched.

Afterwards, the men took their time and finished off the rest of the meat.

When the sun began to set, the skies grew even darker. The world first went grey, then slowly fell into darkness.

Kino pitched her small one-person tent on the other side of the truck from the men's tent.

She brewed one last batch of tea for the men before going to bed. They thanked her again before returning to their tent.

Kino pulled a cover over Hermes' engine and tank, and retired to her own tent.

The next morning, Kino rose while it was still dark. Clouds still covered the sky, and rogue flakes of snow were fluttering from above.

Kino warmed up and exercised in the snow, and did drawing practice with Cannon several times over.

Then she had a breakfast of rations, beat Hermes awake, and started his engine. She tied the sack to the luggage rack again.

"My engine's not a stove, you know," Hermes grumbled.

"Come on, Hermes. It works well as one," Kino replied.

That day, Kino went out hunting with Hermes again and caught two rabbits. One of them was quite large.

She returned to camp, butchered one of the rabbits, and around afternoon, boiled the meat as she had the previous day.

The men came out of their tent and thanked her profusely again as they dug in. Then they returned to their tent to rest.

Kino cut some tree branches to use as kindling and hung them up.

She cooked the second rabbit for dinner.

The men finished the rabbit without leaving a scrap behind. Bones sucked clean began forming a small mound by the campfire.

Over dinner, the smiling men promised Kino that if she were to ever visit their country, they would treat her to so much of her favorite food that she would double in weight.

The men recovered quickly. They no longer staggered.

The snow stopped completely that night, and the clouds began to clear. Stars

slowly came into view.

Kino was wrapped up in her sleeping bag inside her tent. Hermes spoke from outside the entrance.

“Kino, are you awake?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it okay for you to waste time like this?” Hermes asked.

“No,” Kino confessed. “It may be warming up, but I want to get out of this forest as soon as possible.”

“Then why are you here?”

“For the pay. They’re giving me this ring,” Kino replied casually.

“What’s so good about a ring?” asked Hermes. He heard rustling in Kino’s tent. Her left hand came sticking out the entrance. A ring was on the middle finger.

“What do you think?” Kino asked, flipping her hand over.

“It doesn’t suit you,” Hermes declared.

Kino pulled back inside. “Yeah. I think it’ll get in the way when I’m holding the handle. But it’ll fetch a good price. And there’s no harm in helping someone in need.”

“I wonder,” Hermes said tersely.

The next day. It was the third day since Kino encountered the men.

When Kino opened her eyes, the sky was clear with a tint of blue. There wasn’t a cloud in sight.

As Kino went about her morning exercise routine, the sun slowly rose into the sky, a glowing orange orb. It cast a long shadow of Kino on the snow.

Soon, the men awoke. They were now well enough to not only not stagger, but also to boil water for themselves.

“It looks like you’re all feeling much better,” Kino said. The men nodded.

“We sure are, thanks to you.”

Kino shared some of her rations with them for breakfast. It was not much, but enough to satiate four stomachs.

After the meal, the men reminisced about their hometown over tea.

“They’ll be flabbergasted to see us when we get back. Probably had no idea we’d been stranded here all this time. I’d bet they thought we’d all been shot to death somewhere.”

“Must have made graves for us by now.”

“Sounds pretty interesting, being able to walk up and see your own grave.”

The man in his thirties asked Kino where her country was, but she simply shook her head.

“Ah, I see. Sorry for asking,” the man said, ending the conversation.

Afternoon brought warmer weather.

The men told Kino that they wanted to try moving the truck. They would split the job, clearing the snow and building a ramp at the front and back of the truck to somehow dislodge it. Then they could head for the nearest country.

“We need to unload the cargo first,” said the man in his thirties. “Could you lend us a hand, Kino?”

Kino and the men went around to the back of the truck.

Three locks sealed the cargo box. The man in his thirties received the keys from his companions, unlocked the box, and went inside. There was a click.

The man in his forties said to Kino from a slight distance, “Kino, is the motorrad going to be all right?”

Confused by the question, Kino turned. At the same time, the man in his thirties leaned out of the cargo box. He was holding a long persuader. When Kino turned back, the man took aim at her.

Kino’s right hand reflexively whipped to her holster, but she quickly stopped. Then, she calmly looked back at the persuader pointing at her.

“Excellent decision. I’d have shot you on the spot if you’d drawn,” the man said, stepping out of the cargo box with the persuader still trained on Kino.

“Thank you,” Kino replied nonchalantly. The other men took several steps back, threatening looks on their faces.

“I don’t want to have to shoot you, Kino,” said the man with the persuader. “We take pride in transporting our products in mint condition.”

“Products?” Kino wondered.

“That’s right,” replied the man in his forties. “We deal in transporting human resources. Our products are people.”

“So you’re kidnappers, huh. Or slave traffickers,” Hermes, who was parked a distance away, piped up without a care.

The man with the persuader put on a wry grin. “I suppose if you had to be direct, yes. It’s true. And now that we have our strength back, we need to make a living. Which is why, Kino, we’re going to take you with us and sell you. Don’t bother trying to resist.”

“That’s your problem,” said Hermes. “We don’t want to get involved.”

The man in his forties replied, “Don’t worry, Hermes. Your partner’s a diamond in the rough. Add a bit of polish and sheen, and with her being so young, she’ll fetch a very good price. We always make sure to adorn our products with the best clothes and jewelry, which means we can adorn this one with a motorrad. We’re not going to dismantle you.”

“Thank you for making things easy to understand,” Kino said calmly, frozen.

The man in his thirties stared quietly into Kino’s eyes, persuader still aimed. “Don’t hold it against us. We’re honestly grateful for your help. The rabbit was very good. But think about it this way. We’re wolves. And wolves have their own ways. Ways that necessitate certain actions if they want to survive.”

“I see.”

Kino slowly raised her hands into the air.

“All right. Take your left hand and take off the holster you’ve got on your belt. The whole thing.”

Kino slowly unfastened Cannon’s holster from her belt.

“Toss it here.”

Cannon landed between Kino and the men. It lodged itself halfway into the snow.

The man in his twenties tried to retrieve it, but the man in his forties stopped him.

“Take off your coat. Slowly, one arm at a time.”

Kino did as she was told and pulled off her winter coat. Inside was a black jacket and a thick belt around her waist. Several small pouches hung from the belt.

“Now turn around. Easy does it.”

Kino turned. The holster behind her belt contained the persuader she used to hunt the rabbit. Kino called it ‘Woodsman’.

“I knew it. Take off that one too. Toss it here—slowly.”

“I’m surprised you noticed it,” Kino said, her eyes on Hermes.

With her right hand, she took Woodsman out of its holster and tossed it.

“Now put your hands in the air and slowly turn this way.”

Kino raised her hands and slowly turned.

The two unarmed men tried to approach her, but the man in his thirties stopped them.

“Wait. You had knives too, didn’t you? Where are they?”

“Here and there,” Kino replied, looking strangely sad.

“Drop ‘em all.”

Slowly, Kino put her right hand into her jacket pocket and took out the folding knife she used to cook the rabbit. She tossed it in one motion.

Her right hand went into one of the pouches on her belt. She took out a knife, which folded on its own with a click. She tossed it onto the snow.

Her right hand went into the left sleeve of her jacket. She took out a double-edged knife and tossed it. Then her left hand went into her right sleeve and

produced another of the same knife before tossing it aside.

As the men watched in silence, Kino slowly stripped off her over-pants. She unzipped the side and stepped out of one leg, then the other, revealing the boots and pants she wore underneath.

Slowly, Kino squatted and pulled a thin knife from the sheath tied to her boot on the shin. She tossed it aside. She did the same with another knife on her left shin with her left hand.

The knife she cast aside hit another with a clatter.

“What are you, a knife merchant?” the man in his twenties muttered.

Kino’s right hand slowly unfastened the knife from its sheath on the right side of her belt. It was double-edged, 15 centimeters in length, and had a thick, cylindrical grip.

Kino met the gaze of the man in his thirties and finally spoke.

“This is the last one.”

“Toss it too.”

A red dot appeared on the man’s forehead. It was a light.

Then came three gunshots. From three of the four small holes on the border between the grip and blade of the knife came bullets.

Blood spurted from the forehead of the man in his thirties.

The man in his forties noticed Kino rushing towards him the moment he heard the gunshots. He swung with his left hand.

Kino ducked to avoid the attack and twisted his left arm with her own. Then she tackled him with all her weight and thrust the knife deep into the left side of his back.

A brief scream escaped his lips. At the same time, the man with three holes in his head crumpled in the snow.

Leaving the knife inside the older man, Kino lunged at the man in his twenties.

Almost simultaneously, the younger man fell and Kino grabbed Cannon.

Kino quickly operated the safety and stood before the younger man, who lay on the ground under the older man's body.

The man screamed. Kino cast a sidelong glance at the man in his thirties, lying in the snow with his face dyed in blood. Then she took aim at the remaining man.

"Don't—"

There was a gunshot and a puff of white smoke. Kino's right hand bounced into the air. The man's teeth went flying like popcorn. His head sprang up as though jolted, but soon came to a complete stop. Air from his lungs turned the blood pooling in his mouth into foam. The snow piled under his neck slowly melted in his blood.

Kino stood before three corpses. Steam rose faintly from the blood they shed.

"That was close," said Hermes. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Kino replied, and added, "That gave me a scare. I thought I was a goner."

Kino stood stock-still for some time with Cannon in hand.

She stood trembling under the clear blue sky and the world shining a brilliant silver.

"Are you all right now?" Hermes asked.

"Yeah. I am," Kino replied, nodding. The bodies were already cold.

Kino stood before the cargo box. Cautiously taking aim, Kino inched the door open.

"I knew it..." she muttered as she stared inside. The sun cast bright rays into the box.

The cargo box was not very large. And it was littered with pale white bones.

Pale white human bones. Slender ribs. Thin phalanges. A hollow pelvis shattered to pieces. Broken thighbones sucked down to the marrow.

Littering the floor alongside the bones were spent chunks of solid fuel. And metal plates from the cargo box itself. Pieces of backbone lay there, burnt

black.

In a corner of the cargo box was the head.

The head was not very large, tied to a pipe by its long blond hair. It was facing down.

It must have belonged to a girl around Kino's age.

The girl had no eyes or nose, only silent black holes. The flesh had been carved from her cheeks and jaw, exposing more and more of her skull as Kino's gaze went down her face. Her wide-open jaw was hanging from the skull by a sliver.

A fist-sized hole gaped from the front of the skull. The brain was gone.

In the opposite corner hung a bright yellow dress.

"Do you see all this, Hermes?" Kino asked.

"Yeah. Their leftovers," Hermes replied.

Kino looked down at the bodies collapsed outside the cargo box.

"She must have been their precious cargo before this happened."

"And what about before that?" Hermes asked in response.

Kino gazed at the sparkling rope of blond hair and replied pensively, "Who knows?"

She slowly shut the door and spoke to the girl.

"What they did was inhuman. But even they didn't want to die."

"We wasted too much time here. Let's get going soon," Kino said, picking up her knives.

Because Woodsman was stuck in the snow, snow had entered the barrel. Kino took aim in random directions and fired two shots. Then she operated the safety and holstered it behind her back.

The knife in the corpse's back was next. The bloodied blade came clean after a few thrusts into the snow. Kino wiped off the snow with the clothes on the corpse.

There was a lid in the back of the knife's grip. Kino opened it, and three empty cartridges emerged. She took out three rounds from a spare magazine for Woodsman that she had on her belt and loaded them into the knife. Then she sheathed the knife in the case on the right side of her belt.

Then, Kino put on her over-pants and winter coat again. She holstered Cannon as well.

Once she had collected her weapons, Kino quickly dismantled her tent and loaded everything onto Hermes. She started the engine.

But just before she departed, she went around to the side of the truck and crouched beside the corpse holding the persuader.

Kino took off her left glove. The ring still shone on her middle finger. It was the silver ring inlaid with green gemstones.

Taking the original box out of her pocket, Kino put the ring back inside. Then she placed the box in the man's pocket.

"I'm giving this back," she whispered. "I didn't manage to save you, so I can't take this payment."

"Aww. You liked that ring, Kino," Hermes also whispered.

Kino straddled Hermes. She pulled her hat and goggles over her face.

When she stepped on the gas pedal, the engine responded with a roar.

"Let's go," said Hermes.

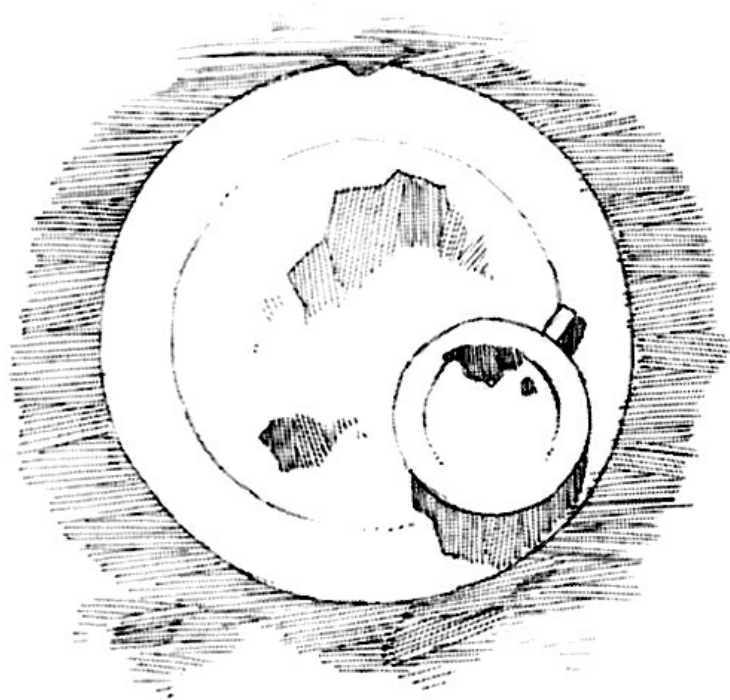
"Yeah," Kino replied.

Kino took one last look around to make sure she was leaving nothing behind. Three rabbits hung in a row from a branch, their eyes on her.

"Don't hold it against us. We're only human."

The motorrad started for the distance.

The truck and the four bodies soon passed out of sight.



Chapter 2: Overprotection –Do You Need It?-



On her second afternoon in a certain country, Kino finished her meal and went back to the parking lot for Hermes.

There, right in front of Hermes, she spotted a man and a woman embroiled in a heated argument. Both were about 30 years of age, and they seemed to be a married couple. Next to them was a boy about 10 years old—likely their son—standing dazed as though he was lost.

“You’re being too overprotective,” said the husband. “It’s not good for the boy!”

“You’re being too callous!” the wife shot back. “This is the least we can do for him!”

The family stood between Kino and Hermes. The air was tense.

Kino finally spoke. “Er...may I get through? You’re standing in front of my

motorrad.”

The man whipped his head around. “What do *you* think?” he asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Kino replied curiously. The man opened his mouth to respond, but his wife cut him off.

“This man *insists* that our son doesn’t need a bulletproof vest.”

“Why would he need one?” Kino asked.

“Because of the war,” the husband replied. “Our son’s going to fight in it.”

“A war?”

“Yes. The first war in our country’s history broke out a few months ago. The military sent out a call for volunteers, and today our son will be joining their ranks. I don’t mean to brag, but he’s a clever boy. He’ll make a fine soldier. He might even come back a hero! But my wife here insists that he needs a bulletproof vest. Ridiculous.”

The wife refused to budge. “*You’re* the one who’s being ridiculous! He needs the bulletproof vest to protect him from mortar shrapnel!”

“He can just duck for that. They have trenches on the front lines.”

“Trenches! Trenches can’t protect him perfectly. And imagine dying by mortar shrapnel; that’s not a hero’s death at all.”

“Think about it. Bulletproof vests are heavy. They slow you down. Fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee, I say! That’s common sense for real soldiers. And imagine the teasing he’d have to endure if he’s the only one who shows up to war with a bulletproof vest.”

“Then he simply has to hold his head high and tell the other soldiers that it’s a present from his mama.”

Kino watched the argument for some time before glancing at the boy. “I think your son should have the final say. He’s the one going out to fight.”

“You’re right,” the woman said, turning to her son. “What do you think, sweetheart? You’ll listen to mama, won’t you? You’ll wear the vest, right?” She pleaded with the boy, bending down and putting a warm hand on his shoulder.

Her husband also bent down, and balled his son's hand into a fist. "Be honest with us, son. You're a real man. You don't need a bulletproof vest."

"Mama and papa will respect your decision," said the woman. "It's up to you."

"That's right," said the man. "What do you say?"

The boy hesitated, but the answer that followed was resolute.

"I don't wanna fight in the war."

The man leapt up. He was livid. "Absolutely not! We're doing this for your sake!"

The woman leapt up. She was also livid. "Exactly! If you become a war hero, you can get a recommendation to a great school in the future! And your classmates are all going, aren't they? You don't want to fall behind, do you?"

"B-but Jo's mom and dad said they'd never let him fight..." the child trailed off. The woman was not having any of it.

"What Jo's family does is their business!"

"That's right. It's not good to compare like that!"

It was an all-out scolding. The boy flinched.

The woman pulled a bulletproof vest out of her bag. It was brand new, packaged in a clear plastic bag with a tag that read, 'Celebrating the participation of our young recruits! Specially designed to reduce shoulder stress! Now equipped with height-adjustment features ideal for growing children! Wear-and-tear-resistant!'

The woman knelt to meet her son's eyes and gave him a gentle push. "Now put this on and we'll head over to the recruitment center. Mama will come all the way there with you."

"He doesn't *need* the darned vest. You're being overprotective."

"What's wrong with wanting to keep my son safe?"

"Nothing. But you shouldn't go overboard."

The boy looked up at his parents as they argued again and reiterated himself.

“I don’t wanna fight in the war.”

“Enough complaining, young man. I swear, you’re just as cowardly as your mother.”

“*What?* He’s simply being stubborn, just like his father.”

The man and woman were both incredulous. The boy was on the verge of tears.

“I...don’t wanna fight in the war...” he trailed off.

Kino interjected. “Maybe you should discuss whether to send him to war or not together, as a family.”

The couple glared at Kino in unison.

“Who are you to tell us how to raise our son?”

“That’s right. This is family business. And we’re doing this for our son’s future.”

“Right...” Kino replied.

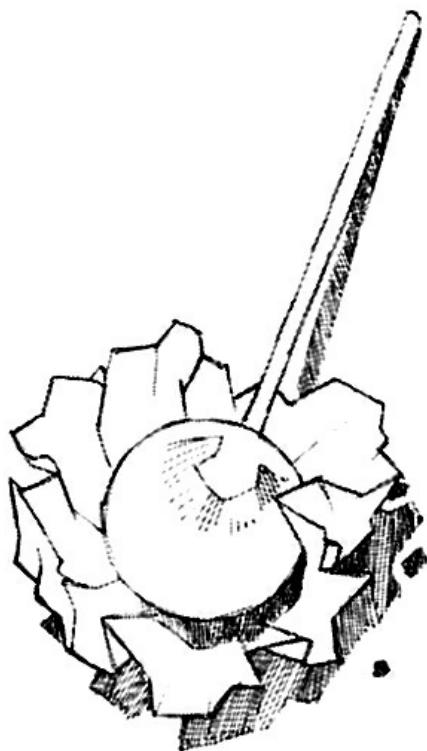
The woman took the boy’s hand. “Let’s go, sweetheart. And you too, dear. We’ll decide what to do about the vest at the center. We have to hurry, or they’ll stop taking new recruits.”

“You’re right. Let’s go, son.”

The man and the woman each took one of the boy’s hands and walked away. Soon they were out of sight.

Kino shook her head. Hermes finally spoke up. “Good job, Kino.”

“I’m exhausted,” Kino sighed, and climbed on.



Chapter 3: The Country with a Wizard – Potentials of Magic–



A lone road ran through the muggy marshland.

Pools of rank water dotted the flat landscape, and aquatic plants covered the surface of the ground. The road snaked to and fro around the marshes.

Built on mounds of reddish-brown earth, the road was wide but eroded, crumbling at the edges. Even the center line was barely dry. The path itself seemed to have melted in the heat and humidity.

Suddenly, the colorful waterfowl cawing throughout the marsh flapped into the air in unison. A lone motorrad emerged down the mud road.

Instead of a back seat, the motorrad had a luggage rack fully laden with travel gear. Its engine filled the marshlands with its roar.

The rider wore a black vest over a white shirt, the collar completely unbuttoned. She wore a thick belt around her waist, and a hat with a visor, and

a pair of goggles. The rider was still young, likely in her mid-teens.

A holstered persuader was strapped to her right thigh. It was a single-action revolver, which meant that it had to be cocked each time it was fired.

The rider drove with great caution; at times the motorrad was caught in the mud and she lost her balance, or the rear wheel spun idly and splattered mud everywhere as rider and motorrad attempted to escape the marshland.

"I know I've said this before, but this road is awful," the motorrad said to his rider.

"Yeah. It's going to take longer than I expected. ...There."

The motorrad's rear wheel had slipped. The rider hefted it up, beads of sweat forming on her face.

"By the way, Kino," the motorrad said after they had covered more ground.

"What is it?" the rider called Kino asked.

"I'd hate it if we the country we're going to all this trouble to reach turns out to be a boring one."

"True, but someone once told me that every country has something interesting to offer."

"You think so?"

From behind her goggles, the rider's gaze rose up to the sky.

"But I guess that also implies that it doesn't really matter *what* country we go to. ...Should we change course, Hermes? It's not too late to head somewhere else," Kino said, stopping the motorrad called Hermes on a relatively dry patch of road. "What do you want to do? I don't mind if we skip this one. There's a road that heads south, towards another country we can visit."

Hermes thought for some time before he responded. "I feel kind of bad for saying this since I'm the one who brought it up, but it's up to you, Kino."

"Right. Then I'll keep going."

"Okay. But why?"

"Just because. It's not like anyone's waiting for me or anyone needs me to be

at a certain country. I just don't feel like going all the way back. And there's no guarantee that the road south will be better than this one."

"What the heck."

The motorrad once more began pushing down the muddy road, as slow as ever.

"I wish you could move on water, Hermes," Kino joked. "Then we could cross the marshland in a straight line."

"That's impossible. Motorrads can't travel over water," Hermes replied without an ounce of humor.

"Have you tried?" Kino asked.

"I don't need to. There's lots of things out there that motorrads can't do. Unlike humans."

"I can't travel on water, either," Kino said.

Hermes was quick to retort. "You can build a ship. And you can take the ship across the water. That's something humans can do."

"I guess you're right. But..."

"But?"

Kino paused for a moment before responding.

"Nothing could beat traveling with you, Hermes."

"Whoa! That's so nice of you, Kino. Let's go faster!"

"All right!"

With that, Hermes and Kino set off with renewed determination.

A second later, the rear wheel sank into mud and stopped completely.

"Ah." "Ah."

"Good day, traveler! Welcome our country. It's been much too long since our last visitor. We're so pleased to have you with us! The journey here wasn't too difficult, I hope?"

Standing before the towering walls and massive gates was a soldier, beaming

at the motorrad and his rider.

“No,” Kino replied, having taken off her hat and goggles as though nothing was wrong. But her appearance suggested otherwise. Her pants were splattered with mud up to the knees, as were her gloves and sleeves. Some of it had dried on her face. As for Hermes, both his wheels were caked with mud, and chunks had hardened on his engine thanks to the heat.

“That’s good to hear,” the soldier said with a smile.

Kino and Hermes completed the necessary procedures and entered the country.

Just inside the gates was an elliptical plaza, with wooden buildings standing a short distance away. The homes were all single-story with elevated floors, supported by thick, sturdy pillars. The narrow stone-paved road was set a little higher than the rest of the ground.

Several men standing in the plaza approached Kino and Hermes, as though they had been waiting for them.

“Good day, traveler! Welcome to our country. I am the chief of this land,” said a man in late-middle age. Kino took off her hat and gave a slight bow.

“Good day. My name is Kino. And this is my partner Hermes.”

“It’s so good of you to come to our country. You’re the first visitor in five years! We don’t have any hotels here, but we can accommodate you in our reception hall. Free of charge, of course. A national guest deserves no less,” the chief said with a courteous bow. The other men followed suit.

“Wow!” Hermes whistled. “This is amazing, Kino. I don’t remember the last time you got such a big welcome. It’s a good thing we decided to come here after all. We almost gave up so many times! The road was so rough we even wondered if we’d find people at all in the end—”

Kino punched Hermes before he could finish. Then she bowed to the chief.

“Thank you. We appreciate your hospitality.”

In spite of its name, the reception hall was nothing more than a slightly large house. According to the locals, it was usually used for events like the harvest

festival, concerts, or elections. The country also had a separate residence for the chief and a courthouse, but Kino would not be able to recognize them unless they were specifically pointed out.

However, the street on which these official buildings stood was clearly more extravagant than the others. It was wider, and the paving stones almost formed a full pavement. Spectacular bronze statues were placed at regular intervals along the center line.

The chief explained that this was the country's only main street, and that the statues depicted past chiefs who left behind great achievements. Moved by the history, he gave a dramatic speech about his life's goal to be chosen to look down upon this street forever, and how he was always hard at work to make that dream a reality.

Kino borrowed a tap to wash herself and Hermes clean of the mud. By the time she was finished, the entire sky was ablaze with the color of dusk.

They were led into a luxurious room. Kino parked Hermes in a corner and unpacked her things.

The chief was brimming with excitement. He insisted on holding a welcoming party for Kino. But thankfully for Kino, someone else had the sense to suggest that the party should be held tomorrow to let the traveler rest.

Kino had dinner at the dining hall, took a shower for the first time in a very long time, and went to sleep.

As usual, Kino rose at the break of dawn.

She went through her morning routine in her large room. She also cleaned and practiced with Cannon, the persuader strapped to her right thigh.

When Kino was finished with the breakfast served to her free of charge, the chief came to escort her to his residence, where the people were preparing a welcoming tea party for her.

"This is going to be really boring, Kino," Hermes said discreetly. Kino nodded, already aware.

"Hermes, remember. They're letting me stay for free. This is the least I can

do.”

“Hm.”

Kino and Hermes went out into the street. It was clear that day, but the wind was strong and humid.

“This time of year, we get powerful gusts in the mornings,” said the chief. “But the wind calms down after that.”

Kino was served tea at the lobby of the chief’s residence. The chief’s wife and their supporters were also there.

At first, the conversation was mostly about Kino’s travels. But soon the chief began to take over, giving a lengthy lecture on the greatness of their country.

He described the founding of their country on what seemed to be unusable marshland. Their lofty ancestors had toiled away, and their efforts finally culminated in the development of efficient farming techniques that allowed their small country to produce a surplus of food. He raved about their safe and peaceful community, and repeated his speech from the previous day about great chiefs of the past being memorialized as statues that overlooked the main street.

“I still have a very long way to go,” the chief said with a laugh, making sure to note that grain harvests had increased by three percent since he had become chief.

Kino went through the motions of nodding and agreeing throughout the speech. She was fully aware that Hermes was actually dozing off behind them.

Afterwards, the chief invited Kino to lunch. The food served at his official residence was decadent and delicious.

After that, they returned to the lobby for more tea. The chief started on another lecture, saying, “And another great thing about our country—”

“Chief, please!”

A woman in her late twenties burst through the doors with a piercing plea. She produced a letter from her pocket and held it out to the chief.

The chief reluctantly took the letter and read it. His face went rigid.

“How many times do I have to tell you? No means no!”

For some time, the woman and the chief were embroiled in an argument.

“Please, I only need two out of the way! And it’s only for a few minutes!”

“No! Have you no respect for our venerated ancestors?”

“But you want to leave behind a great legacy, don’t you, Chief? I can help put up a statue of you.”

“Enough with your pipe dreams! This idea of yours is clearly impossible!”

“We won’t know until we try!”

Kino sipped her tea as she watched the argument.

“We know already!”

“No, we don’t!”

“Good grief. What is wrong with you?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Chief!”

“Enough!”

“You can’t stop me— What the? Hey, let me go!”

The argument finally ended when the woman was dragged away. The chief breathed a heavy sigh and shook his head.

“I’m terribly sorry for that display, traveler. Unfortunately, the chief is mandated to lend an ear to the requests of all citizens.”

“I see. And what did this woman want?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, traveler. Something silly about moving the statues... Anyway, let’s get back to our discussion.”

“Oh, about that,” Kino said, slowly rising from her seat. “I’d like to thank you for the lesson on this country’s history, but would it be all right if Hermes and I went to see it for ourselves now?”

Finally released, Kino went out into the street.

“Were you asleep this whole time, Hermes?” she asked jealously.

“Yeah. I feel all rested. The argument woke me up, though.”

At that moment, Kino spotted the woman from earlier. She was zooming off on a bicycle, fast enough to outpace a motorrad.

“Oh, that’s her.”

Kino went after her on Hermes. The woman greeted Kino as they rode side-by-side.

“Hi there. You’re the traveler from earlier, right?”

“Yes,” Kino replied loudly.

“I’m sorry about interrupting you.”

“Not at all. You helped me get out of an uncomfortable situation,” Kino replied. The woman chuckled.

“Say, why are you asking for the statues to be moved?” asked Hermes. The woman simply looked at Kino and Hermes for a time before she finally spoke.

“Well... Do you have some time to spare?”

“Yes, but not for any more bragging about the country.”

“How honest of you. Follow me—I’ll show you something amazing.”

The woman made a sharp turn into an alley. Kino missed the alley and had to rush around to follow.

As they left the town center, the ramparts came into view and they saw fewer and fewer buildings and more and more fields and paddies, along with the people working them.

The woman turned into a narrow, winding path without slowing once. She finally came to a stop at a large warehouse surrounded by fields. Next to it was a magnificent mansion and a crane truck.

The woman pulled off the top of her overalls and tied the sleeves around her waist. Then she splashed water on her sweat-soaked face and looked back at Kino, haphazardly drying herself off with a towel.

“Welcome. My name is Nimya Tchuhachkova—it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Kino, and this here is my partner Hermes.”

“Hi there.”

Nimya opened the warehouse door and gestured for Kino and Hermes to enter.

It was dark inside. The smell of oil filled the heavy air.

“Let me answer your question from earlier. I asked the chief to move the statues because I need to secure some open space on the street.”

“For what?” Kino asked.

“Well...for this,” Nimya replied, pressing a switch next to her. The lights slowly came to life and the fans started running.

A moving crane was affixed to the warehouse ceiling. The floor was littered with machinery, and scrap metal was piled in a corner. Several desks furnished the space, laden with a mess of documents. Multiple bicycles hung from the ceilings or lay on the floor.

And at the center of the warehouse was a silver contraption.

It was a machine with a streamlined design, about the size of a truck. It seemed to have fins and a tail like a fish. What seemed to be a three-bladed fan was stuck on one end, and a matching set of large panels that were wider than they were long were stuck to either side of the body. Legs with tires on the end protruded from under the panels.

“What is this?” Kino asked after a moment’s thought.

“I haven’t named it yet,” Nimya said, turning to Kino and Hermes. She put on a dubious but charming smile. “But this is a flying-machine.”

“This machine can let you fly? How?” asked Kino.

Nimya nodded and rattled off an explanation. “When the panels are parallel to the ground, they won’t do anything even if you blow a fan at them. But if you change the angle even slightly, the wind pushes the panels backwards and raises them into the air. It’s like when you’re biking with a hat on your head; if you look up, the hat flies away. So I applied that theory to my machine. If you raise the panels and secure them at an angle, then move the entire machine at

a certain speed and maintain the speed, the panels will rise. Then the rest of the machine will rise too. That's how I think I could fly on this contraption. The panels here are going to rise thanks to that big fan at the front."

"That must have taken a lot of thought," Kino said.

"Yeah, but I've never had the chance to test it out. If I want to get this machine into the air, I need a street—one that's level and straight, and long enough to boot. And the main street with all the official buildings is the only one that fits the bill. That's why I was asking the chief to move the statues out of the way."

"I see. And the chief doesn't want to move the statues. I suppose he thinks this is impossible."

"That's right. And it's not just him. Everyone else here thinks it's impossible for a machine to fly through the sky. I tried explaining the theory so many times, but they just wouldn't listen. So I want to let them see with their own eyes what my theories really mean."

"Right."

Kino looked up at the machine. Its metal parts were exposed to the air.

Nimya offered her tea. Kino took a cup. An engine with nine cylinders was affixed to the front of the body of the machine. "Interesting aroma. Is this a special tea?"

"Hm? No, it's nothing special. At least, not in our country. I hope it's to your liking," Nimya said, taking a seat on her desk. Kino sat in the desk chair.

Suddenly, Nimya leapt to her feet. "Say, Hermes? You're a motorrad; you should know whether my machine will work the way I think it will."

Hermes' answer was immediate. "Sure, I knew as soon as you explained. And I could tell you if it'll work or not, but can I ask you something first? What do *you* think will happen?"

Nimya fell silent for a moment, but she soon replied with confidence, "It'll fly! My theories are correct! They're right, and this machine *will* fly!" Tea spilled from her cup as she tightened her grip on it. Kino took another sip.

“Yep. From what I can tell, this machine’s capable of flying. It’s even controllable. Now all you need is a long, flat street to help it take off,” said Hermes.

“Yes!” Nimya cheered.

“Hm,” Kino mumbled.

But Nimya’s joy quickly turned into a sigh. “A street. Now that’s the biggest problem.”

That was when they heard a car pulling up outside. Then a violent knock on the door.

“Nimya Tchuhachkova! Open up! It’s me.”

It was the chief. Nimya clicked her tongue in annoyance and pressed a button next to the desk.

The shutters opened and sunlight filled the warehouse. Over a dozen men entered, with the chief in the lead.

“Good afternoon, chief. If you’re here, does that mean you’re willing to hear out my request?”

“Of course not. ...Hm? What are you doing here, Traveler?”

“I was just serving our guest some tea and giving my side of the story. Is there something wrong with being hospitable?” Nimya argued.

The chief was visibly displeased, but he attempted to maintain an air of calm. “Nimya. I’m here to talk about your...request.”

“Yes?”

“In our country, people are free to do as they like so long as they do not transgress against the law or harm the public good. But as the one in charge of running this land, I cannot agree with you wasting your time and money on this worthless dream of flying on this contraption,” the chief declared, tone overflowing with dignity. Nimya shot him a glare.

“It is *not* worthless. Good day.”

Kino and Hermes could hear the chief grind his teeth.

“It’s no use, chief,” said a middle-aged man. “She’s completely out of her mind! Look at this ridiculous machine.”

“Don’t touch it!” Nimya hissed as the man approached.

The man snorted. “Why would I want to touch this thing?” He shot back, scrutinizing the machine. “Look at this beautiful engine. Wasted on a foolish contraption...on a...on a *giantfan*!”

“That’s right. In principle, it works just like a fan.”

“So how does a giant fan let you fly? Try explaining so a simpleton like me can understand,” the man said snidely. The others burst into laughter.

“You use this fan to pull the machine forward.”

“You *pull* it? With a *fan*?”

“Yes. If a fan produces wind, it means that there’s a force in the fan that’s going in the opposite direction. When the fan’s blades turn at high speeds and send wind to the machine, the machine will be moved by the force. It’ll run.”

Two seconds later, the man guffawed. “This is a riot!”

“What’s so funny?”

“Heh heh heh... Listen, Nimya. I’ve been using a fan for years, but the thing’s never budged from my desk. Hah hah hah... Ridiculous!” The man doubled over in laughter. Several of the others snickered.

“That’s just because your fan was fixed securely to the spot! There was too much friction between the fan and the desk! But try putting it on a big, flat piece of ice at full output! Then see what happens!”

The man was now in tears from laughing too hard. “So what kind of spell are you going to cast to get this giant fan to move, eh?”

Laughter filled the warehouse again.

“Numbskulls,” Nimya muttered.

Once the laughter had died down, another man spoke. “All right, let’s give you the benefit of the doubt and say this contraption really does move. It’s got tires, I mean. You’re saying it can *fly*, though, right?”

“Yes. If it can go fast enough, the wings will achieve lift,” Nimya replied, pointing at the machine.

“‘Wings’. You mean those flat panels sticking out of the sides?”

“That’s right.”

“Hm...I think there’s a bit of a design flaw here,” the man said gravely.

“What?” Nimya gasped.

The man paused, deliberately taking his time for dramatic effect.

“The wings are fixed so tightly...that they couldn’t possibly *flap*!”

The men burst into laughter again. Nimya was furious.

“These wings *don’t* need to flap! When wind—I mean, air—passes from the front to the back of the wings, the angle of the wings creates a difference in the amount of air that passes above and below, creating lift! Here, let me show you.”

She turned on the fan on her desk. Then she brought over a board and held it at an angle before the fan. It rose into the air.

“See? This is how it’ll work.”

The man was not particularly impressed. “I don’t see how hard it would be to make a flimsy panel like that fly into the air. But how much does your machine weigh? How much do *you* weigh?”

A third burst of laughter. Nimya went silent with outrage.

“This all sounds like hogwash, Nimya,” said the chief. “It’s ludicrous.”

“Listen. Everyone,” Nimya said. “Don’t any of you ever want to try aiming for something new? For innovation?”

“And take down our statues for your attempts? The answer is no. Would you tear down your own house just to see if you can communicate with ants?”

“I would do it in a heartbeat if I saw it was a possibility. I’ll be asking for your cooperation when that happens,” Nimya said, glaring. The chief sighed and shook his head.

“At first I thought you’d been working on a machine that would be helpful for agriculture. But all this time, you’d been wasting your parents’ inheritance on this...madness.”

“It’s not madness! This is a flying-machine!”

“Oh, it certainly would be one, if you were a wizard. But isn’t this contraption a little big to be a broomstick?” someone joked. Everyone burst out laughing. The chief looked Nimya in the eye.

“Nimya, we’ll be coming by tomorrow afternoon to dismantle this machine. I’m sorry to say this, but I see no other way to cure you of this insanity. It is the chief’s prerogative to take action in cases of emergency. We will take the engine into public custody and use it for a generator. Do you have anything you want to say before we leave?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Please move the statues.”

“No.”

Nimya was silent.

“All right, everyone, let’s get going now. We’ll be back tomorrow, Nimya.”

The chief and his men left the warehouse.

The sound of the fan filled the deserted space.

Nimya guzzled the rest of her cold tea and turned to Kino and Hermes, who had been watching quietly from the sidelines.

“So now you know what’s happening here. Never a dull moment, don’t you think?”

“Er...right. Actually, someone’s still here.”

“Huh?”

Nimya looked up. A well-dressed young man remained. He looked at Nimya solemnly. She turned to Kino and Hermes. “Let me introduce you. This is my fiancé, although I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

Kino nodded lightly to the man. He slowly walked up to Nimya.

“Do you understand now, Nimya? Please stop this foolishness.”

“You’re calling this foolishness, too?”

“This whole...flying business. I don’t want to say this, but I know the fortune from your parents has almost dried up. I know you’re hardly eating properly. And that things are going to get even harder for you financially by next week.”

Nimya said nothing.

“So would you please sell this place and come with me? I’m ready for you to move in anytime.”

“It looks like he really cares for her. But that makes it even more—” Hermes whispered, but Kino put a finger over her lips to silence him.

Nimya still did not say a word.

Her fiancé continued. “Would you mind if I stayed the night here? Let’s take our time and talk things out.”

“No. I have work to do,” Nimya replied quietly.

“What kind of work? Can I help?”

Nimya shook her head. Then she grabbed him by the collar and gave him a soft kiss.

“It’s okay. Please leave for now. ...I’ll contact you tomorrow.”

Once her fiancé was gone, Nimya closed the shutters completely. She strode to the silver flying-machine and slammed a hand against it.

“I don’t have much time left! I swear, I’m going to fly on this thing tomorrow morning and show those numbskulls that I was right!”

“The problem now is securing the street,” said Hermes.

“Yes! If only I could use the street, I could take off! And once I’m in the air, things will work themselves out. I could ram the chief’s residence if I had to.”

“Really?” Hermes asked, excited. Nimya finally calmed down.

“Well, in any case...I guess I should think about the logistics.”

Nimya returned to her desk and sat in the chair Kino offered her with a word of thanks. Kino stood, leaning against Hermes.

“I just don’t have enough space to go before takeoff. I’ve done the calculations over and over again, but even in the morning, when the winds are at their strongest, one of the statues is going to be in the way. Even if I manage to lift off, the machine will get caught in that statue,” Nimya sighed, looking down at scraps of paper filled with calculations and formulas.

“It won’t work even with the engine at full throttle?” asked Hermes.

“It won’t be enough.”

Nimya and Hermes fell into thought. But Kino spoke up without much thought.

“What if you built a ramp in front of the statue? A motorrad can jump over obstacles that way, so I’m sure your flying-machine could do the same.”

Nimya stared. Kino was taken aback.

“It’s just a suggestion...”

But some moments later, Nimya spoke. “You’re right. If I can build a ramp, I might not have to move the statue!”

“Good one, Kino!” Hermes cheered. Kino scratched her head, embarrassed.

“You think so? Thanks.”

“Hold on a second. Let me run the numbers.”

Nimya leaned over her desk and performed multiple calculations. But soon a bitter look rose to her face.

“No, it’s not going to work. Even with the ramp, I won’t have enough speed. The machine will fall straight back even after the jump.”

“I see.”

“But the reasoning is sound. The problem now is speed. If we can just figure out how to give it that extra boost...”

Hermes and Nimya went silent again. And once more, Kino spoke up without much thought.

“It’d be nice if you could launch it all in one go with gunfluid, like how a persuader shoots bullets.”

Nimya turned and shook her head. “That won’t work. I understand what you’re getting at, but you’d need a big, sturdy cylinder to launch the machine from. And a launch like that will damage the machine, too.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“A dud. Too bad, Kino,” said Hermes. Kino pointed her finger at him and pretended to shoot her persuader. Her right hand rose after the mimed shot. Nimya looked up.

“...Kino, you were pretending to shoot a persuader just now, right?”

“Huh? Yes.”

“And your right hand went up at the end.”

“Yes. The recoil on my persuader’s quite strong,” Kino replied, tapping Cannon with her finger.

For a time, Nimya’s gaze froze blankly. But she soon broke her silence. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“I don’t need to launch it like a bullet! I just need to use the recoil! It’ll work just like a persuader; just add gunfluid into the pipe and induce ignition in stages, instantly producing gas! Adding a few of those pipes to the machine will give it the speed boost it needs!” Nimya cried, and pointed inside the warehouse. “I have pipes, and I have gunfluid! I can do this!”

“That’s perfect! You really are pretty smart, Kino!” Hermes cried.

“I don’t get any of this,” Kino mumbled in confusion.

The next morning. It was Kino’s third day in the country.

The chief did not rise even after dawn.

He lay comfortably asleep in bed, caressed by the cool morning winds.

The sun soon began to filter in through the window and the winds picked up, when he opened his eyes to a commotion coming from the main street. He

heard the rumble of a truck and the sound of something being installed.

That was when he heard loud knocking, and a subordinate rushed into his bedroom.

“Chief! C-come quickly!”

The chief threw on whatever clothes he could find and hurried into the street. His jaw dropped.

The shortest, most stout statue standing in front of the residence had been transformed into a ramp. It looked as if the former chief was hugging scaffolding made of pipes and metal plates.

“Good morning, Chief,” Kino said with a smile, passing by. She pulled on a rope as she headed to the border between the sidewalk and the road. The rope was wrapped in yellow cloth with the words ‘DANGER: DO NOT ENTER’ printed in black letters.

The chief looked to the next statue over. There stood a silver machine glinting in the morning sun. The flying-machine he had seen the previous day in the warehouse. Unlike the previous day, however, there were several thick pipes affixed to the bottom of the machine. Next to the machine was the crane truck owned by the Tchuhachkova family.

The chief blinked and shook his head.

Kino was busy setting up a rope boundary on the other side of the street. Several people watched in curiosity. Kino responded to their questions with a smile. “Please stay behind the yellow line. It’s dangerous past here.”

Hermes stood before the flying-machine. Nimya, dressed in overalls, tied a rope to his luggage rack. The other end of the rope was secured to the flying-machine’s tire mechanism.

Nimya climbed up the flying-machine and took a seat in the flyer-seat. Then she put on her work goggles and gloves, and strapped herself in.

She waved to Kino, who had straddled Hermes, and gave her a thumbs-up.

Kino started Hermes’ engine. The engine roared. The chief scurried to her side.

“Traveler! What is the meaning of this?”

“Please get back, Chief. It’s dangerous here.”

At that very instant, the street was overwhelmed by a roar about three times louder than that of Hermes’ engine. The flying-machine was coming to life, and its fan was rotating.

The chief tried to say something, but Kino could not hear him.

The sidewalk was crowded with bystanders drawn by the noise. Some people were watching from their windows.

Kino pushed the chief out of the way and looked up at Nimya.

The flying-machine’s roar grew even louder.

Nimya punched the air with both hands and crossed her arms over her head. Then she opened them. Kino started Hermes. The mechanisms holding the flying-machine’s tires in place came undone in unison.

The flying-machine began to move as though sliding. A second later, the town was assaulted by a roar three times louder than that of the engine. White smoke gushed from the pipes under the machine.

“It’s exploded!” cried the chief.

“No, it’s going as planned,” Hermes muttered to himself. As though kicked by an invisible giant, the flying-machine accelerated and climbed up the ramp in the blink of an eye. The force of the launch shook nearby buildings, and every bystander’s eye was drawn to one direction.

The flying-machine launched itself off the ramp in an instant and flew straight into the sky, smoke trailing behind it.

The smoke clouded Kino’s vision. And by the time the morning wind cleared the smoke, the flying-machine was growing smaller against the clear blue sky. The pipes came loose from the machine and fell, no longer smoking. They landed in the marshlands outside the country and drove themselves into the ground.

The flying-machine was almost out of sight when it turned back. It began growing larger in the distance.

Then, it flew clear over the heads of the people with a boom. Everyone but Kino stared with mouths open, mesmerized. Then their mouths began to move in unison.

“It’s flying...that metal contraption is flying.”

“This is unreal. It’s got to be impossible, right?”

“She’s flying...”

Kino, who had been smiling all the way since Nimya took flight, turned to Hermes. “What do you think?”

“I’m kind of envious. That’s all,” Hermes replied quietly.

Nimya shouted from the flyer-seat. “See? It’s flying! I knew it would work! My calculations, my experiments, they were all correct!”

She maneuvered the machine in midair, circling over the country or flying upside-down or turning from side to side.

Eventually, the machine was flying level with the ground again.

“Ugh...I feel sick...” Nimya muttered.

“Everyone!” Kino suddenly cried to the people standing in awe. “That flying-machine needs a long, straight road to land safely on the ground. If you’d like to help this woman and her great achievement become living history, please move three of the statues aside. Four, preferably.”

“O-of course. Right away,” the chief said, nodding. “Everyone! Let’s get those statues out of the way! Quickly!”

The people moved quickly at the chief’s urging. They used Nimya’s truck to pull the statues clear out of the ground. They covered the holes left behind with the panels that had been used for the ramp. Their desperate efforts moved a whopping seven statues off the street.

In the blink of an eye, Nimya had the long street she needed. Countless people lined either side of it.

Soon, the flying-machine slowly descended and slid towards the street. Its three tires hit the ground simultaneously and the engine shut down.

The flying-machine stopped right in front of Kino.

The people of the country cautiously crowded the machine. When Nimya took off her goggles and got up from her seat, the crowd stirred. Kino and Hermes watched it all from the back.

“Nimya...”

Her fiancé was the first to speak.

“See? I was right!” she cried, tapping the flying-machine. “We can fly somewhere on this machine for our honeymoon. Let’s get married tomorrow!”

Her fiancé looked up at her. “I...I had no idea, Nimya—I mean, my lady...”

Nimya gave a confused look.

“I can’t believe it! You were a wizard all along!”

“Huh?”

“I apologize, my lady! In our ignorance, we treated you like a fool and insulted you! Please forgive us powerless people!”

“What?” Nimya uttered in shock. Her fiancé knelt. As if on cue, so did the rest of the people.

“Forgive us!” “Forgive us!” “Your forgiveness, my lady!” “Please forgive us!” “Forgive us!” “Forgive us!” “Forgive us!” “Forgive us!” “Forgive us!”

It was like watching ripples spread across water, with Nimya and the flying-machine at the center.

“What’s happening? Why are you all acting this way?” Nimya wondered.

“Lady Nimya. O great wizard. We apologize for our impudence,” the chief said, rising to his feet. “We ask that you guide us hopeless people with your great power. You are now the leader of our land. As chief, I hereby hand all authority over this country to you. Please, Lady Nimya.”

Nimya was stunned into silence. Meanwhile, Kino was rushing to take her things off the truck and load them onto Hermes. Someone stopped her, just as enraptured as the rest of the citizens.

“Traveler, are you a wizard too? Then please stay with us and guide—”

“No, I’m not! And I think it’s about time for me to leave this country!” Kino declared, securing her luggage and putting on her hat and goggles. Nimya climbed off her flying-machine and came up to her. The crowds parted to make way.

“We’re leaving right away,” said Kino.

“What? Why not stay a little longer?” Nimya asked, surprised.

“I’m sorry. I think things might get a little complicated if I stay. But in any case, congratulations.”

“Congrats. That was really moving,” said Hermes.

Nimya looked around and sighed. Then she turned back to Kino and Hermes. “Thank you. I couldn’t have done it without you.” She smiled. “You might have come to this country on a whim or by coincidence, but to me...it was like destiny. If not for you, my flying-machine would have been dismantled and I would have lived the rest of my life in despair. Really. I can’t express how grateful I am.”

Nimya offered Kino a handshake. Kino took it.

“Congratulations, Nimya. It was fun to watch all this happen.”

“Me too. Goodbye.”

Nimya watched until the motorrad disappeared around a corner. Then she turned to the people kneeling before her and wondered, “Now what do I do?”

Kino and Hermes left the country through the deserted gates.

The swamps were as numerous as ever, but the road was not as muddy as before. It made for a much easier ride. They continued with the country’s walls behind them.

“That was amazing, Kino! I really liked everyone’s surprised faces at the end. They were scared stuff!”

“Scared *stiff*, you mean.”

“Yeah, that,” Hermes said, and went silent.

The motorrad continued down the road cutting across the marshlands.

“...But you know, I was really surprised,” Kino muttered quietly.

“Yeah. From the way those people reacted, it looks like Nimya’s going to live with a big misunderstanding for a while. I bet she’ll get her own statue soon.”

Kino paused before responding.

“That wasn’t what I meant, actually.”

“Huh? Then what?” Hermes asked.

“I didn’t think that her machine would actually manage to fly,” Kino finally said.

“Kino. What did you just say?”

“I didn’t think it would actually fly. I kind of understood the gist of her explanation, about how the machine gets lift and flies, and about the panel in front of the fan. But I was still skeptical to the end. ...It was really incredible.”

For some time, the motorrad continued down the road, silent save for the rumbling of its engine. The colorful waterfowl cawing throughout the marsh flapped into the air in unison.

“Then why’d you help her, Kino?!” Hermes asked in shock. Kino’s response was calm.

“Because I thought it would make for a cool sight if she succeeded. And if she failed, I assumed she’d understand and give up. And...”

“And?”

“I was bored.”

There was a moment of silence.

“So...” Hermes said slowly. “So if...*if* this country wasn’t a boring one, you wouldn’t have helped her?”

“Maybe. I mean, who’d believe that a machine like that could actually fly?”

Hermes was lost for words. Kino continued.

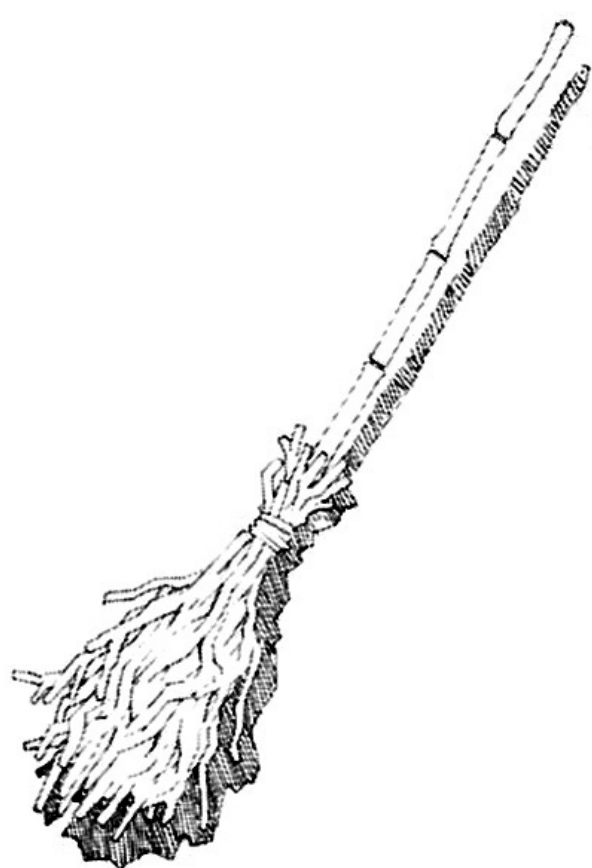
“But it really flew. It was just like magic. I was really surprised, and I realized it really was worth trekking through all that mud to see something like that. ...Is

something wrong, Hermes?”

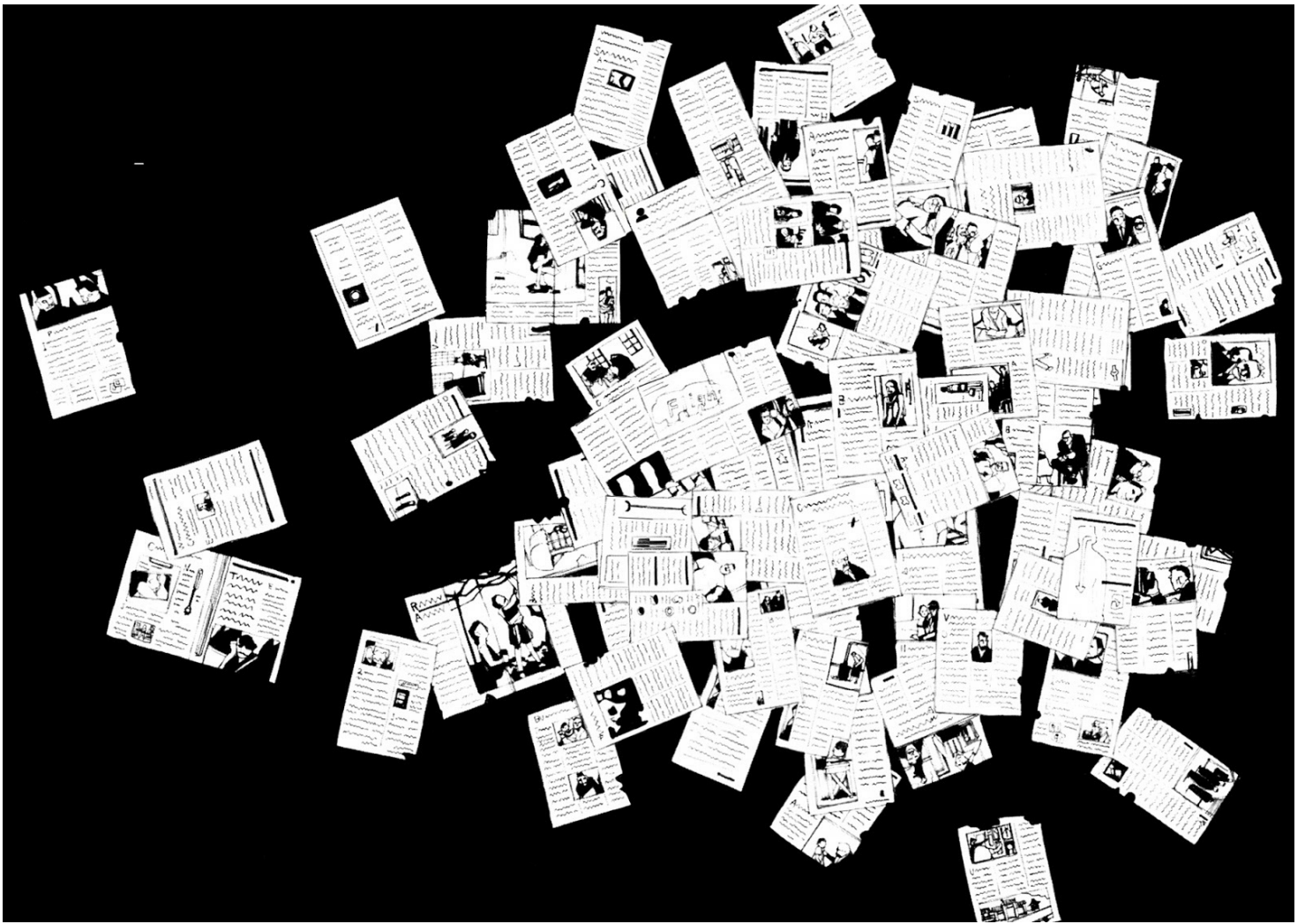
“Nothing. I’m just considering the boundless potential that humans have,”
Hermes replied gravely.

“Mhm.”

The motorrad continued its leisurely ride down the road by the marshland.



Chapter 4: Country of Free Press –Believers–



The Media del Press Daily

Year 893, 5th of the Month of the Deer

SHOOTING CASE DEEMED JUSTIFIED SELF-DEFENSE

Yesterday afternoon, a traveler (age unknown) opened fire on a nearby office worker (male, age 55) on 56th Street in the Western District. The victim survived with serious injuries. The police declared the incident a case of justified self-defense. The traveler, who entered the country on the 2nd, left the country on the evening of the incident. Public discourse on persuader control and the definition of justified self-defense is expected to intensify.

SHOOTING VICTIM REQUIRES 1 MONTH HOSPITALIZATION

Shots were fired yesterday at 11:29 AM on 56th Street in the Western District. A scuffle broke out between a traveler visiting on a tourist visa and a passing office worker when the office worker approached the traveler's motorrad, angering the latter. The victim stepped towards the traveler, who took out a persuader and fired two shots with no warning. The victim sustained bullet wounds to the right shoulder and leg. He was taken to a nearby hospital by emergency services and will require a month of hospitalization.

The traveler was taken into immediate custody, but testified that the victim attempted to steal the motorrad and became violent first. The traveler claimed justified self-defense, which the police acknowledged. The traveler was permitted to leave the country in the evening.

The West Gate area on 56th Street, where the incident took place, is a popular area often packed with lunchtime shoppers. The incident caused a large commotion, but no one else was injured.

Other incidents deemed cases of justified self-defense include a case on the 1st in the Southern District when a police officer fired 14 shots without warning and killed a young man who lunged at another officer. The police were quick to declare it a case of justified self-defense, sparking a grassroots protest calling the incident 'an act of police brutality'. (SEE PAGE 39 FOR RELATED ARTICLE.)

MURDER IN BROAD DAYLIGHT: THE TRAGEDY OF JUSTIFIED SELF-DEFENSE

Shots and screams filled the peaceful city yesterday at noon. Someone had fired a persuader in the middle of a street packed with shoppers.

A man falling to the ground, bleeding from his shoulder and leg. A young woman desperately attempting first aid. And—according to witnesses—a traveler looking on coldly, persuader in hand.

The victim was a 55-year-old office worker employed by the country's top medical equipment company. He was visiting the area yesterday on business. The incident occurred right after he and his colleagues stepped out of a nearby restaurant after lunch.

According to his colleagues, the victim was engaged in conversation when he spotted a motorrad parked on the street and approached it. He was praising the

motorrad to his colleagues when the traveler—the motorrad’s owner—came in angrily and gave the man a threatening warning.

According to his colleagues, the victim responded in a friendly tone, but the traveler ignored him and again loudly commanded him to ‘step away from [the] motorrad’. When the victim stepped forward to again warn the traveler, the traveler fired two shots without warning. The victim fell to the ground, bleeding from his shoulder and leg.

The victim was taken to hospital for immediate surgery, and will require one month of hospitalization to recover from his injuries. Most severe was the wound on his right leg, where the bullet missed a major artery by only a few centimeters.

According to the lead surgeon, “[He] could have been killed if the shot had gotten any closer.” The victim is still reeling from shock and his memories of the incident are hazy as a result.

“How could this have happened?” said a family member who rushed to the hospital, despondent. When informed that the police declared the traveler’s actions an act of ‘justified self-defense’, she replied, “How is it right to let someone off the hook for shooting a man for no reason? Justice is dead.”

“The police are only fanning injustice,” says the victim’s lawyer, who is preparing to file a lawsuit against the police on his client’s behalf. “We cannot let this madness continue.”

Opinions

JUSTIFIED SELF-DEFENSE ADMISSION IS DEFEAT FOR RULE OF LAW

Tony Methone, former judge of the Southern District Court

The traveler is said to have opened fire without good cause. It is not difficult to imagine that the traveler was banking on departing quickly with easy impunity thanks to being of a traveler status. The traveler opened fire without warning—a clear sign of hostility and cunning. That the traveler was not detained and made to stand trial is a defeat for the state and its rule of law. I am very disappointed.

PERSUADER CONTROL TOO LAX

Nyahe Luatoba, Chairman of the Civilian Watchdogs of Police

The police have been far too lax on unwarranted persuader use recently, claiming that looser controls will save more lives. Conveniently enough, this incident took place only days after the police brutality incident occurred and sparked heated debate on persuader control and justified self-defense. Perhaps the ‘traveler’ was never meant to be arrested to begin with, and is now receiving a generous pay-off somewhere outside our borders.

*

The Media del Press Daily

Year 893, 7th of the Month of the Deer

Readers’ Comments

STRONGER BORDER CONTROL NEEDED

Betino Teteths (28/Female/Homemaker)

When I heard the Media del Press Daily news on the 4th, I found myself flinching. The incident with the traveler firing on the man shocked me to the core.

The police are under fire for their decision to deem the incident a case of justified self-defense, but I feel that the immigrations office at the gates should be held responsible.

Persuader ownership requires police clearance even for the most upstanding of citizens, with easily portable hand persuaders requiring a particularly rigorous background check. And yet the traveler was allowed to enter with a clearly-visible persuader, and was allowed to leave the country on the very day of the incident as though nothing had ever happened. I was appalled all throughout the news report, and by the time the coverage turned to the

hospitalized victim, I was muttering out loud without even realizing.

My five-year-old son asked me if I was all right, looking terrified. I told him that I was, and gave the sweet boy a hug. At the same time, I seethed with anger at the cold-hearted traveler. The immigrations office should never have allowed an armed person to cross our walls! We need stronger border control for the safety of our children.

PLEASE THROW AWAY YOUR PERSUADER, TRAVELER

Anné Erèts (7/Female/Elementary school student)

Something very sad happened near my house. A man who wanted to look at a motorrad was shot by the motorrad's owner. The poor man was hurt in his shoulder and his leg.

Why did you shoot him, Traveler? I don't understand.

You said, 'because I thought he was going to steal my motorrad'. But I think he just wanted to see your cool motorrad from up close. It must have hurt so much. It must have hurt his mom and dad too. Don't you know what a mom and dad must feel? You must have a mom and a dad back home. How would you feel if your mom and dad got hurt?

People use persuaders to hurt or kill people and animals. I wish persuaders were gone. Then no one would get hurt.

Please throw away your persuader, Traveler. And please be a good person.

A CALL FOR GREATER TRANSPARENCY

Eliza Brow (64/Female/Homemaker)

When the previous issue of this paper announced the results of the baby panda naming contest, I was as excited as anyone. After all, I had submitted a humble entry of my own.

My submission was 'Lea'. Easy enough for children to remember, and it would evoke the image of a happy panda playing in the wilderness. I trembled in awe

when I first came up with the name.

But imagine my shock when I found that 'Lea' had not even been placed on the rankings, let alone selected!

The announcement declared that the winning name was 'Leaf'. Only one letter longer than my own submission.

When I realized that 'Lea' had not been chosen, I was at peace with the decision; my sensibilities simply didn't mesh with those of the judges. But that the winning submission is so similar to my 'Lea' bothers me.

According to the announcement, the winning entry was submitted by a 17-year-old girl from the Northern District. But I find it questionable that a young girl with so little life experience could create an entry deserving of first place.

I realize that it is not good to suspect others, but I simply cannot help but wonder if someone on the panel was so enamored with my entry that they decided to change it and enter it again under the name of a teenaged girl.

Similar submission contests have been in the past plagued with such suspicions. This contest may be no exception.

Perhaps future submission contests should be mandated to have some sort of an ombudsman group to make absolutely certain that the real winner is properly credited for her work.

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The News Works Times

Year 893, 5th of the Month of the Deer

SHOOTING CASE DEEMED JUSTIFIED SELF-DEFENSE

Yesterday afternoon, a traveler (age unknown) opened fire on an office worker (male, age 55) who touched the traveler's motorrad without permission. The traveler issued a clear warning to the man before opening fire, but the man resisted and the traveler was forced to retaliate. The police declared the

incident a case of justified self-defense, and the traveler was allowed to safely leave the country on the evening of the incident.

WOULD-BE THIEF SUSTAINS MINOR INJURIES

Yesterday at 11:28 AM on 56th Street, a traveler who arrived two days earlier on a tourist visa discovered a drunk man touching and attempting to ride the traveler's motorrad without permission. In spite of multiple warnings, the man was too intoxicated to respond properly and even lunged at the traveler, who continued to try and reason with him. The traveler was forced to fire two shots from a hand persuader (22mm automatic model), shooting the man in his right shoulder and right leg. The drunk man was quickly taken to hospital, and will only require a week of hospitalization.

Police were immediately on the scene and questioned the traveler, but eyewitness testimony cleared the traveler of charges. The traveler was allowed to leave the country safely yesterday evening, harboring no ill feelings towards our country, according to police.

The injured man was completely drunk at the time of the incident, claiming to remember nothing at the hospital. He was given a stern warning by police.

The deterioration of public safety has rapidly become one of the country's chief concerns. One of the most prominent recent cases in point was the drug addict incident on the 1st, when a drug-addled man severely injured his physician and escaped the hospital, swinging a kitchen knife at a patrolling officer to take his persuader. Another officer opened fire at the attacker, preventing any further casualties. (SEE SOCIETY SECTION FOR RELATED ARTICLE.)

DRUNKENNESS NOT A LICENSE FOR CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

INCIDENT NOT DECLARED CRIMINAL CASE

Maybe he thought he could get away with anything. Why else would a grown man try to approach someone else's property without permission, in spite of multiple warnings?

The point everyone needs to remember is that the man who escaped with minor injuries in yesterday's incident was completely drunk at the time.

Just before the incident, the would-be thief had lunch at a nearby restaurant for business. The server testified that the man and his colleagues had imbibed large quantities of alcohol, and were chatting loudly to the point of bothering the other patrons. When the server requested that they quiet down, the man had instead roared at him to 'shut up'.

The motorrad must have caught the drunk man's eye when he left the restaurant. No one knows what it must have looked like to him, but he went up to it without a second thought and touched the handle and fuel tank without permission, and even attempted to ride it. That was when the owner came back, having gone to pick up a sandwich for lunch.

The eyewitness accounts add up: at first the traveler politely pointed out that the man did not own the motorrad, at which point he became furious.

'Who do you think I am, you think you're the boss of me?', 'I used to ride one of these back in the day. It's mine now', 'go home, kid', are among the things he said to the traveler, according to testimony. The traveler remained calm and attempted to reason with the man, but he refused to listen. Perhaps provoked by the traveler's serenity, he kicked the motorrad and lunged at the former with a roar. It was only then that the traveler opened fire.

The shot struck the man in the right shoulder, but he continued to charge forward, which forced the traveler to shoot his leg. Only then did the man finally stop.

Hospital officials claim that the traveler's persuader is a small-caliber model with low firepower, and that it could not kill a man unless shot directly at the head or chest. The two wounds sustained by the would-be thief were clearly nonlethal, especially thanks to the skilled traveler taking aim at places that were least likely to kill him.

Opinions

A PERFECTLY JUSTIFIED CASE OF JUSTIFIED SELF-DEFENSE

Wole Tadato, former Director of Ministry of Defense

The traveler’s actions were perfectly legal and acceptable within the bounds of self-defense, and were simply an extension of defending one’s property. Witness testimony shows that the drunk man was the initial aggressor, and the traveler attempted to verbally convince him otherwise. And yet the man tried to attack. It would be unthinkable to not defend oneself in such a situation. I praise the police force and their decision to declare the incident a case of justified self-defense.

STRICTER PUNISHMENT NEEDED FOR CRIMES COMMITTED UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Tenoste Tenosno, Chairperson of Alliance of Parents Bereaved by Alcohol Use

The attempted theft has likely ruined our country in the traveler’s eyes now, giving us the appearance of an uncivilized place full of outlaws. But things would have been worse had the police taken him or her into custody for assault. I would like to applaud the police’s judgement.

It is about time that we stop lightening sentences for criminals who commit crimes under the influence. Stricter punishments must be enforced, and underage drinking rooted out. It is too late to have regrets when your own child has been killed by someone under the influence of alcohol.

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The News Works Times

Year 893, 7th of the Month of the Deer

Readers’ Comments

FAILURE IS THE MOTHER OF SUCCESS

Eliza Brow (64/Female/Homemaker)

When the previous issue of this paper announced the results of the baby

panda naming contest, I was as excited as anyone. After all, I had submitted a humble entry of my own.

My submission was 'Lea'. Easy enough for children to remember, and it would evoke the image of a happy panda playing in the wilderness. I trembled in awe when I first came up with the name.

But imagine my shock when I found that 'Lea' had not even been placed on the rankings, let alone selected!

The announcement declared that the winning name was 'Leaf'. Only one letter longer than my own submission.

When I realized that 'Lea' had not been chosen, I was at peace with the decision; my sensibilities simply didn't mesh with those of the judges. But that the winning submission is so similar to my 'Lea' bothered me. It upset me even more because I've submitted entries to similar contests so many times.

But I will not let it bring down my spirits. Failure is the mother of success, they say. Even if my relatives complain that this is not something an old woman should be spending her time on, I will continue to submit my ideas to contests like this one.

(Editorial note: This submission has been edited for publication.)

NOT ALL USE OF FORCE IS WRONG

Norgan Hetney (76/Male/Unemployed)

I was astonished when I heard that the man injured in the shooting case on the afternoon of the 4th, along with his parents, are planning to file a suit against the police for deeming the incident a case of justified self-defense.

He drank himself silly before it was noon, laid his hands on someone else's property and ignored repeated warnings, and went so far as to attempt to use violence. How is this in any way right? Who educated this pitiful man?

People may say that opening fire meant the traveler was willing to kill, but look at the facts. The man was well warned, and the shots only hit his shoulder and leg, one bullet each. I was a police officer fighting crime on the front lines

for 40 years, and will note that if I were the traveler and I were intent on killing, I would have aimed for the head or the chest. It is extremely unfair to paint the traveler as the villain just because of the use of a persuader.

Perhaps the public has been far too attuned to the idea that *any* use of force by a stronger party is wrong. But I ask such people to put themselves in the traveler's shoes; what would you have done if a drunk man were threatening to rob you, and launched himself at you? I hope my questions will change at least some of your minds.

A REMINDER OF A PAST EXPERIENCE

Anonymity requested (30/Female/Office worker)

The case with the traveler shooting the drunk reminded me of something I went through in the past.

I was 15 years old when I was assaulted in my own neighborhood.

He was a middle-aged man, bright red with alcohol even though it was the middle of the day. I was so shocked I couldn't even scream. Completely drunk, the man groped me, made lewd comments, and disappeared snickering.

I sat crouched there for hours before my mother came and found me. She took me immediately to the hospital and contacted the police as well.

The police soon found the man and brought him in. Though I was afraid, I worked up the courage to speak out and told the police that they had found the right man. But the man said that he was the principal of a famous middle school and would not be caught dead doing what I accused him of. That he would sue me and my parents for defamation if I pushed him any further.

Unfortunately, the man was released because of a lack of evidence. The man made many terrible comments to my family before he left. My father did some research later and found that the man was indeed a principal, and an important figure in the education sector to boot.

Several years later, the man died and rumors began spreading about how he was an awful drunk and had verbally abused others at PTA meetings.

It has been 15 years since the incident, and I do not want to speak ill of

someone who is already dead. I cannot provide any evidence to prove my claims, either.

But I would like to applaud the police for acknowledging the traveler's actions as justified self-defense. I still remember the kind words a female officer offered me 15 years ago as I wept at the police station.

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“—that's what it says, Hermes,” said a human in the middle of the desert.

The desert was wide and flat, stretching on for what seemed like forever. The setting sun cast an orange tint over the sands.

The human who spoke was in her mid-teens, with short black hair, large eyes, and fair features. She wore a black jacket and had a thick belt wrapped around her waist. On her right thigh was a holstered hand persuader.

In her hand was a finished newspaper. Scattered around her were yet more pages.

Nearby stood a motorrad. A rifle-type persuader was leaning against the motorrad, and a large travel bag sat next to it.

“A skilled persuader user who travels on a motorrad,” said the motorrad called Hermes. “That sounds almost like you, Kino. I wonder if anyone's read these articles and thought, ‘hey, this must be Kino’.”

The human called Kino put on a wry grin. “Cut me some slack, Hermes. I wouldn't suddenly open fire in the middle of town like this.”

“True,” Hermes admitted, and paused. “...Say, why do you think this traveler fired, then?”

Kino turned her gaze to the setting sun. “I can't really tell from the articles. Maybe this person's a sadist who enjoys shooting people, or a hero who knows when to stand up for what's right. Or maybe both.”

“You're right. ...You know, these articles are missing something really important. Can you guess what it is?”

“No,” Kino replied, curious. Hermes quickly answered.

“The motorrad’s agency. What bothers me is that they didn’t they get any comments from the victim here. How is this any kind of free press? It’s ridiculous.”

Hermes complained for some time. The sky went from orange to purple and soon the stars began twinkling.

Kino took a blanket out of her luggage and laid it out on the sand, and put on her brown coat. Then she checked that the rifle leaning against Hermes was loaded, looked into the scope, and placed it next to the blanket.

“By the way, Kino? Why did you pick these articles to bring, anyway?” Hermes asked out of the blue.

“It was just a coincidence. They’re from some old newspapers I got. And I’m using them for *this*,” Kino replied, and stripped away the pages one by one. Then she wrung out each page like a rag, and stood them up together on the sand as though building a tent. “They’re perfect for kindling when you can’t find any firewood around. Newspaper burns really well if you know how to use it.”

Kino struck a match against her boot, and lit the newspaper.

“So it doesn’t matter to me what’s on the pages.”

Countless stars twinkled in the dark purple sky.

A small flame flickered to life on the dark ground below.



Chapter 5: The Story Behind the Paintings – Happiness–



“It’s it an absolute masterpiece?” said the hotel owner.

The traveler was in the lobby, looking up at an oil painting. It depicted a tank barreling across the battlefield as it mowed down its enemies. Some of the enemy soldiers were being thrown into the air.

“I’ve seen a lot of paintings of tanks by this artist since coming to your country. Is he really that popular?”

The owner nodded vigorously, as if having waited for that question. His tone grew solemn. “Ten years ago, minor ethnic tensions sparked a civil war in our country. Fellow countrymen slaughtered one another for four years and six months. And at the end of it all, we understood the meaninglessness of war.”

“How does that relate to these paintings?”

“The paintings serve as a reminder. Each and every one of us in this country

bears a deep hatred of battle now. And each time we look at this artist's works, we remember the emptiness and sadness of the past and affirm our determination to never war again. That is why so many people here have them on display."

"I see."

"He appeared seemingly out of nowhere two years ago, this artist. All he ever painted were tanks on the battlefield. All masterpieces, of course. Now he is not simply a popular painter, but a creator who gave birth to a symbol of peace. A true spokesman of our country. ...Have you been to the assembly hall yet, Traveler?"

The first thing the traveler saw upon entering the majestic stone building of the assembly was a large hall decorated with a massive painting. Another tank was depicted in it, engaged in a desperate and epic struggle. Under the painting was a stone plate engraved with the words:

'Behold the limp arm jutting from the burnt tank as it points straight toward the heavens—a symbol of the lofty goal of peace to which we must always aspire!'

"A fine work, do you not agree?" said a man in late middle-age to the traveler. "The declaration below was written by the current governor."

The man introduced himself to the traveler as the principal of an elementary school. His school had recently purchased another painting of a tank by the same artist, he said.

"We use the paintings to teach our children about the horrors of war. They've begun to understand that in war, even children are crushed by these tanks—and that that is something horrible and painful, and not glorious in the least. These paintings are more educational than any textbook. The purchase we made was a large one, but I think it was well worth the price. Have you seen the painter's artbook, by any chance?"

The artbooks were stacked in a massive pile as the bookstore's centerpiece display. One was purchased right before the traveler's eyes.

'Paintings oozing with anguish and life—a must-read book for all citizens!' was

written on the cover.

The traveler opened up the book.

‘The yellow flower crushed under the heartless caterpillar tracks symbolizes the life of a nameless soldier who perished on the front lines.’

The book also featured an essay by a gallery owner said to be the country’s top expert on this artist’s work.

‘The recurring motif of the tank is the most important part of the artist’s body of work. In spite of its powerful cannon and impenetrable defenses, a tank is so easily destroyed on the battlefield. It is indeed a metaphor, a symbol of the strength and frailty of the human spirit. This shows—’

The traveler closed the book, remembering how the hotel owner had raved earlier that day.

“There is great power behind exquisite works of art. These works speak to us on an almost-metaphysical level. They resonate with our souls more than any thesis or political speech. I guarantee you that the artist’s works are on that very level. I wonder now how I’ll look upon his works five, 10, 15 years from now. I want to preserve these works and the emotions they evoke until my dying day.”

On the morning of her third day on the country, Kino woke at sunrise as she always did.

“Good morning, Hermes,” she said, loading her supplies onto the motorrad’s luggage rack. She came out of the hotel with him.

It was early enough that the streets were still deserted when they rode out into the suburbs and the fields. That was when Kino spotted a young man zoning out on a chair in the middle of nowhere.

“Oh, it’s been a long time since I last saw a motorrad. Are you a traveler?” asked the young man. Kino stopped Hermes. She even shut off his engine.

“Yes. We were just leaving.”

“What are you doing here, mister?” asked Hermes.

“I’m an artist. I’ve been thinking about painting a new work, so I came out to get some fresh air. The morning breeze always helps me clear my head.”

Next to the young man was an easel, a large canvas, and a bag splattered with paint.

“I see. Do they sell all right?”

“Yeah. People’ve been hanging them up everywhere these days. I even saw one of my paintings at the assembly hall the other day.”

“By any chance,” said Hermes. “Was it a painting of a tank?”

“Ah, you’ve seen it?”

Kino nodded. “Yes. We’ve seen your works everywhere. Could I ask a question?”

“What is it?” replied the young man.

“Why do you paint tanks and battlefields?”

The artist smiled. “Excellent question.” His smile turned into a grin. “Because I love tanks! I love them so much that I paint nothing else! You know what I mean, right? Those thick armored shells and the powerful turrets! Caterpillars that can crush anything! Tanks are the king of the battlefield!”

A smile slowly rose to Kino’s face. The artist continued.

“I just love painting tanks fighting in the heat of battle. So that’s all I ever did. You have no idea how shocked I was when I took them to the gallery one day and the owner bought them. Said something about learning our lesson and never repeating past mistakes, and paid me a handsome fee. I was over the moon. Now I can afford good food and the best tools for my work. And I can paint from morning to night, too.”

“You see happy,” Hermes said. The artist nodded vigorously.

“You bet! What could be better than doing what you love for a living? Every day is the best day of my life. Tell me, Traveler—I bet there are cooler, better tanks in other countries, right? Amphibious tanks, ones with multiple turrets, maybe. I’ve even heard of armor-piercing uranium core rounds or frag shells that penetrate straight through reactive armor. That’d be something to see in person. Don’t you think?”

The artist looked up at the sky, entranced. Then he seemed to be struck by

inspiration.

“Ah, just thinking about it fills me with inspiration. All these ideas are flooding my head. This time I’ll go with a flat design. Turretless with a fixed cannon that you can aim with a hydraulic suspension system. It’s hiding in a pit, lying in wait for the enemy, as still as a stone. The foes won’t even notice until it’s too late. That’s when the 105mm cannon comes roaring to life! The rounds find their mark and instantly engulf the enemy’s armored car in flames, and their loathsome soldiers will be burning and flailing like in a dance! Yes! That clears out the enemy! Wow...this is brilliant! I know exactly how I’m going to paint this one. It’s going to be a masterpiece!”

The artist clenched his hands into a fist, trembling.

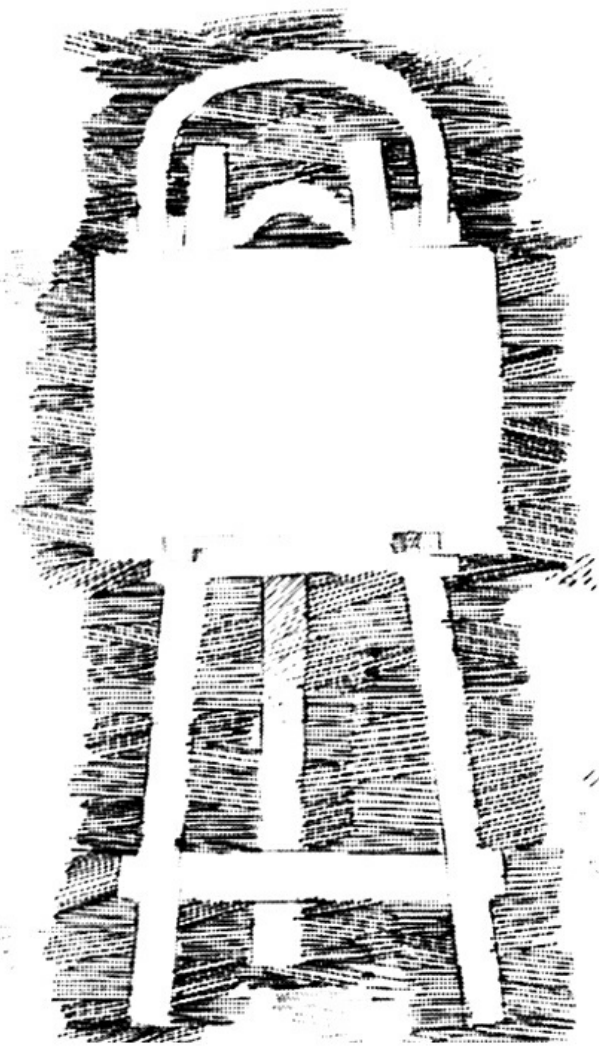
He quickly set up his easel and fixed the canvas on it.

“Let’s get going,” Kino said, starting Hermes’ engine again. She turned to the artist as he squeezed paint onto his palette. “Good luck, then. I hope you’ll keep painting to your heart’s content.”

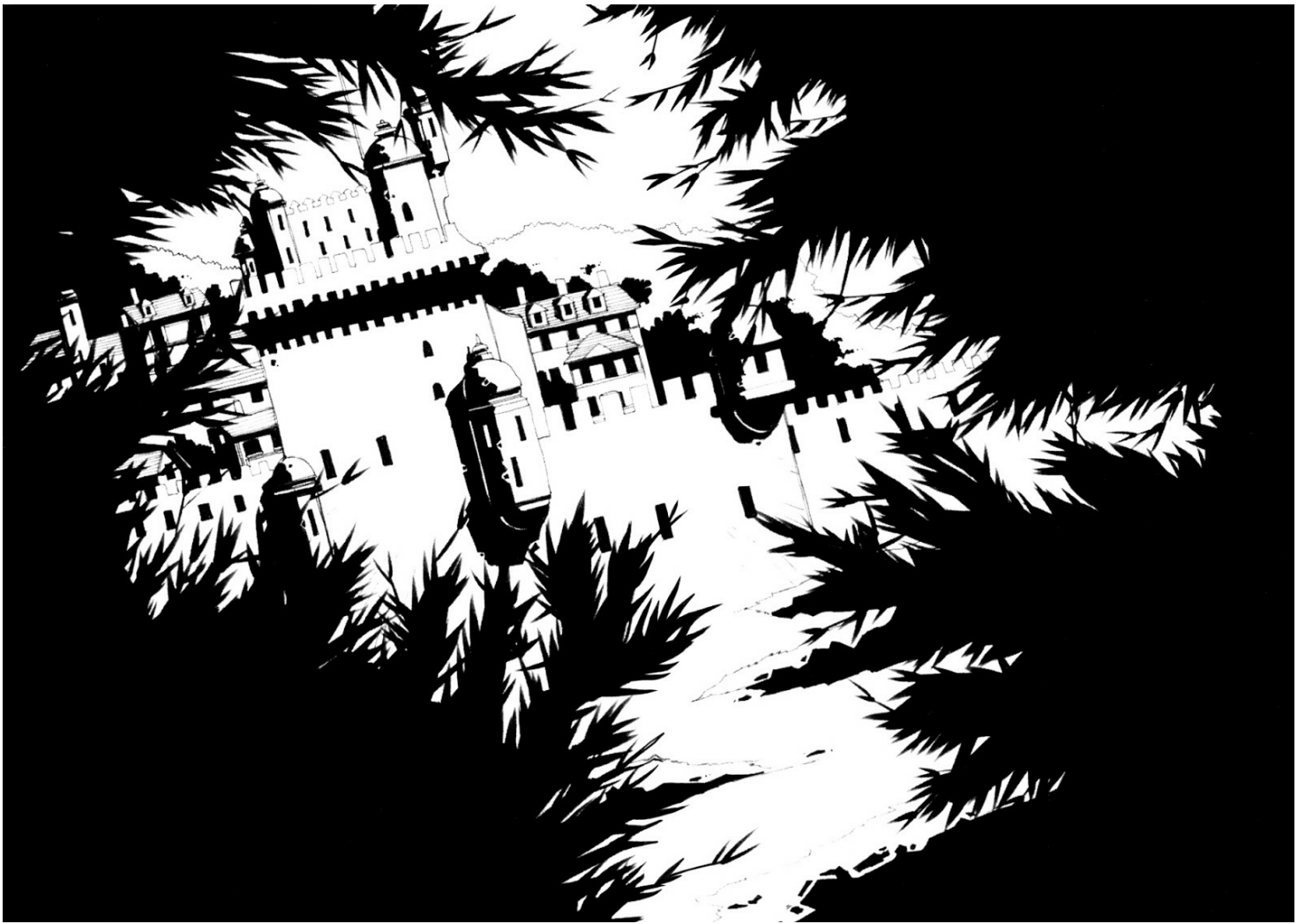
“Thanks. Safe travels!” the artist smiled.

The motorrad soon disappeared into the distance.

The artist began painting another tank.



Chapter 6: Homecoming -‘She’ is Waiting for You–



I'm back.

That big grey structure beyond the majestic forest is the wall of the country where I spent the first 15 years of my life.

A clear stream cuts a path through the woods, and in that gap I can clearly make out the watchtower at the top of the ramparts.

It's been five years since I saw it last. And nothing has changed. I'm gazing at the wall. It's hard to believe I'm actually awake.

My things are heavy, but I heft them once again and walk slowly down the stream. To home.

It's so close. I'll be at the gates before evening.

I have no father. He passed away before I was born. Mother supported us by making and selling jam. Everyone loved her jam, so I was fortunate to have never experienced poverty.

My homeland was peaceful, but I always found it very dull.

Year in, year out, we would do the same work on the farm. Mother would boil fruit every day; another symbol of my repetitive life.

By the time I was 11 or 12, I began to seriously dream of becoming an adventurer. Of leaving my country to see the world, every day filled with excitement and new discoveries.

My dreams grew and grew. On my 15th birthday, I finally made my decision. Naturally, Mother was against it.

“Why don’t you understand? People from this country are best off staying here.”

But I did not listen to her. I did feel apologetic—Mother had raised me alone all this time, after all—but I was more interested in chasing my dreams.

One other person tried to stop me from leaving.

Toto.

She was five years younger than me. When I was 10, she lost her parents. Mother decided to adopt Toto because she was a friend of Toto’s parents.

Toto was a quiet, introverted girl. She seemed to have trouble talking with others, always avoiding people and not even going to school.

At some point, though, she began learning jam-making from Mother. Toto improved in the blink of an eye, always helping Mother with her work.

“Toto is so much better with her hands than you are, Schwarz. After I die, Toto can take over my recipes and the store, and you can take care of Toto and the store,” Mother would joke, a burden lifted from her shoulders by Toto’s presence.

Eventually, Toto grew used to me as well. We would play together when we didn’t have anything to help out with.

Our favorite game was playing water pistols. I would wait for her with my water pistol fully loaded, and rush out, shouting, “Look out, here I come!”

If I managed to hit her, I would win. If she managed to dodge, Toto would win.

I was always the winner at first. I would shoot, and Toto would get drenched. But eventually, she began to figure out where I was lying in wait and avoided my attacks before I could even leap out. Toto would always laugh, watching me trying and failing to get to her.

“Nothing’s going to change your mind, Schwarz? I wish you wouldn’t leave. I wish you would stay here with us forever.”

I wavered even more than I did with Mother. Toto was looking into my eyes.

Back then, I think I must have loved her. The girl who was always with me.

But I followed through with my decision. On the morning of my 15th birthday, I left the country. I tried not to think about the things I left behind. About Mother. And especially Toto.

“You’ll come back someday, Schwarz,” Toto said at the end. “I’ll wait here for you forever.”

I left the country and began my journey, but nothing worked out the way I wanted it to. My vague dreams of excitement and discovery were shattered.

The first country I visited was in the middle of a terrible drought. Farming their arid lands was the only work I could get. But I stayed there for an entire year to finance my travels.

The second country was recruiting mercenaries in preparation for war. I enlisted, swelling at the idea of being a war hero, but all they made me do was carry things around. And the war never happened, in the end. They paid me a humble fee and told me I was no longer needed.

The third country was caught up in a gemstone rush. I joined in, just as excited as the locals, but all I could do with my complete lack of knowledge and technique was run odd jobs for the miners. Even if I discovered ore, it was not mine to keep. I quit my job the next spring and left the country.

In the final country, I worked as a prison guard. I thought I was lucky to stumble upon the open position, but it turned out to be tedious work. The prisoners were well-behaved. Not one thought about escaping. Bored to tears, I found my chance and fled. It might have been the first time for them that a guard decided to escape the prison.

After that, I wandered from one place to another. I could not stay long in one country, and none of the excitement I craved ever happened. I exhausted myself every day, searching for food in the forests and rivers.

It was after half a year of that life that I decided to go back home.

I had to walk a long way from my first glimpse of the wall, but now it is twice as high in my line of sight as it was back then. Suddenly, I hear splashing.

The overgrown grass is in the way, but I can hear sprays of water ahead of me. I pull out my revolver and peer at the river from a distance.

A human. A girl on the opposite bank, washing her hair in nothing but her underclothes. She's about 15 years old, skinny with short black hair.

Toto.

She hasn't noticed me. I look on with conflicting emotions.

It's painful to acknowledge that I was wrong.

Wandering from one country to the next, I realized that leaving my homeland for a fool's dream was the wrong thing to do. But I never wanted to admit it.

But looking at Toto now, I find myself with a bitter laugh on my lips. I can now admit it easily. I admit that I was an utter idiot. That Toto and Mother were right.

People in every country live the lives they were born into, finding happiness and meaning in their day-to-day activities. A kind of life I once thought too ordinary and dull, but now I see it differently.

That is the life I want. Making and selling jam with Toto every day. A normal life where everything is ordinary and unspecial. And if the past five years of traveling were what it took for me to learn this lesson, maybe it was worth it after all.

I have several things I want to do.

The first thing is to apologize to Mother and Toto for worrying them.

I need to take jam-making much more seriously now too. Toto must be working hard every day just like Mother, doing everything she can to preserve

the flavor. And I want to be there to take care of her.

I want to bake new bricks to fix up our old house. I'll have to chop firewood every day, too.

But before all of that, I want to tell Toto that I'm finally back, in one piece.

I empty out my revolver. All nine rounds in the cylinder and the slug in the middle, too. I put the rounds in my pocket. Then I creep forward through the grass to make sure Toto doesn't notice me.

Toto has finished her bath; she turns her back to put on her clothes. I take aim at her from the opposite shore and rush out into the open. I know exactly what I'm going to say: 'Look out, here I come!'

"Look out! Here—"

It feels like someone has kicked me in the chest. Toto turns, her right hand outstretched. For some reason, it's wrapped up in white smoke. I can't hear anything.

Everything goes dark.

What's happening? I can't see

I don't

Why

Toto

I

Why?

The second Kino pulled her hand persuader from the holster under her pile of clothes, she turned and fired. She had chosen Cannon, the large-caliber revolver with an octagonal barrel.

The shot pierced the man's chest and destroyed his heart. The second shot went through his mouth and lodged itself in his brain.

Two gunshots filled the woods. The second shot was fired so quickly that it

almost blended into the first. Birds rushed into the air, spooked.

The man died with his aim still on Kino. His body landed in the river with a loud splash.

Kino wiped herself down and put on her clothes. Her pants, her boots, her white shirt, and her long black vest. She wrapped her belt around her waist and tied Cannon's holster on her right thigh.

Standing in the grass next to the water's edge was a motorrad laden with travel gear.

"Are you okay, Kino?" he asked loudly.

"Yeah. I got him before he could get me," Kino called back.

"That's good to hear."

Kino went up to the motorrad. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Hermes."

"Was that a bandit?" Hermes wondered. "He couldn't be alone, then."

"I thought he was just a peeping tom at first. I was surprised when he leapt out with a gun."

"Anyway," said Hermes. "We're kind of weird for being here too, but I wonder what this guy was doing here?"

"Maybe he was on his way to the country," Kino replied, looking over at the grey wall.

"For what, though? There's nothing but bones and skulls in there."

Kino nodded. "Yeah."

"Some countries can be so pointless to visit," Hermes said nonchalantly. Kino took out a small wooden box from the compartment on his rear wheel.

"Yeah. That's what happens when a pandemic strikes."

"No survivors, huh?"

"None. It must have been at least two years."

"Huh." Hermes paused. "Oh, I know! Kino, I bet that man was a grave robber. Some sort of scavenger going after the treasures left behind in a ruined

country! Maybe he attacked because he thought you were a rival.”

“Maybe. Or maybe not,” Kino replied. She took out a vial of gunfluid and two extra rounds from the wooden box, and loaded Cannon.

Then, she closed the box and took out a small mirror. Kino scrutinized her own face and fingered her bangs.

“Maybe it’s a little short. What do you think, Hermes?”

“I think it’s okay,” Hermes said, disinterested. Kino put the mirror back.

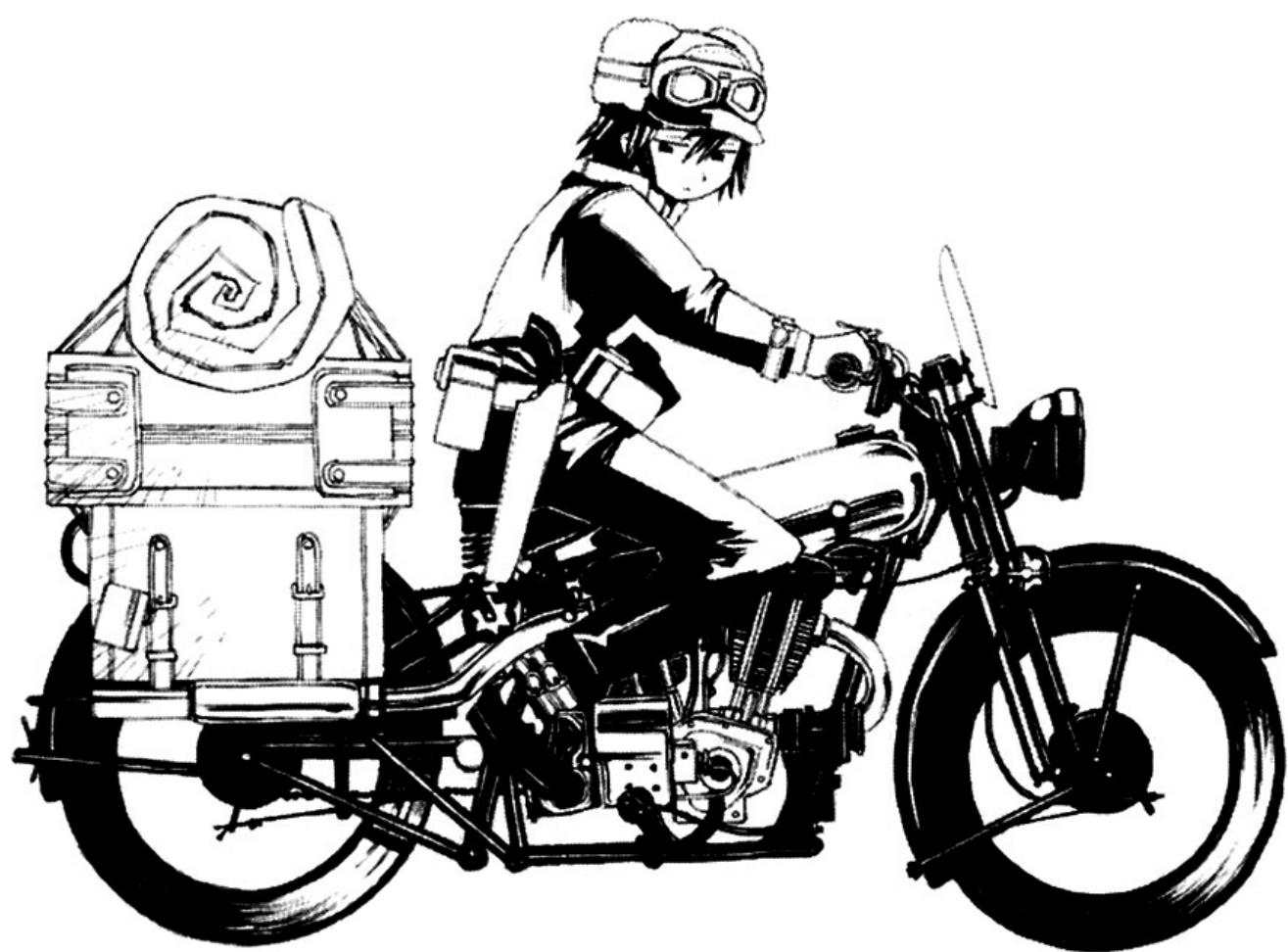
Putting on her hat and goggles, Kino started Hermes’ engine.

“Let’s get going. Preferably to a country with living people this time. And a safe one would be even better.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

The motorrad disappeared into the woods.

The man’s body drifted down the river.



Chapter 7: The Country of Books –Nothing is Written!-



“A resident card? Er...I’m not a resident.”

“Hm? Ah, I see! You’re the traveler. The one who arrived this morning by motorrad.”

“That’s right.”

“You didn’t bring any books with you, I see...”

“Pardon me?”

“N-nothing. Just talking to myself. ...So, you would like to borrow this book?”

“Yes. May I?”

“Hm. Your name?”

“Kino.”

“And where are you currently staying?”

“The hotel on the corner over there. What was it called again... I’m sorry, I

can't seem to remember. It's the one with the blue roof.

"Ah, that's not a problem. I know which one you're talking about. When will you be departing our country?"

"In two days. I'll return the book tomorrow."

"Excellent. Let's make you a library card—write your name and sign here. You can keep the Address and Social Insurance Number sections blank."

"Right. ...Here you are."

"Thank you. One moment, please."

"Thank you."

"By the way, Kino. How do you like this country? Tell me what you think of it, if that's all right with you."

"It was surprising to see so many books."

"Remarkable, isn't it? Reading is our national pastime. People only stop reading to sleep at night. I don't know what other countries are like, but I am quite convinced that none can match ours in the number of libraries and bookstores."

"You might be right. At least, I've never seen such magnificent libraries in any of the lands I've visited thus far."

"Then I ask that you try your hand at the art of reading during your visit, Kino. There's nothing quite as enriching. ...Here you are. The library opens at 5 in the morning and closes at midnight. We have a returns box in front of the entrance if the library is closed for the night."

"I see. Thank you."

"Hermes, are you awake?"

"Hm?"

"Hermes?"

"Sending a telegram...? I understand..."

"Hermes, are you talking in your sleep?"

“Huh? What? Oh. It’s you, Kino.”

“Let’s get back to the hotel. It’s going to get dark soon.”

“Finally. ...Hey, what’s that heavy thing you just loaded? Did you buy explosives?”

“I borrowed a book.”

“What?”

“Something to read at the hotel before I go to bed.”

“More reading? You spent the whole day at the library, Kino.”

“It might be nice for once, you know. I think I might go back to the library tomorrow.”

“...”

“Do you want to come too? Although I can’t see you climbing the ladders to get to the higher shelves, Hermes.”

“Motorrads can’t fly, and we don’t read books. I’m not jealous at all, Kino. Hmph.”

“Good morning, Kino. I’m kind of surprised. You wake up at the same time every day like clockwork.”

“Good morning, Hermes. I’m kind of surprised you woke up at the same time as me today.”

“Nah, I just slept so much during the day yesterday that I wound up staying up all night. I don’t mind, since it looks like I’ll have the whole day to catch up on sleep.”

“I see. ...Say, Hermes? Did I talk in my sleep at all? I had a strange dream.”

“That’s unusual, Kino. Tell me what it was about before you forget about it. And no, you didn’t talk in your sleep.”

“Okay. ...I was wandering this pitch-black but bright space with no sense of direction and no idea how to get anywhere. I didn’t know anything about the past or future, either. And for some reason, a white wolf was chasing me. Apparently someone who looked a lot like me had stolen something valuable.

There was this red-eyed witch who was always with me, and she would heal my injuries and sometimes sing me the most pleasant lullabies.”

“ ...”

“The witch and I would drink tea at cafe patios or take quiet walks through the snow. That was when a child appeared and spouted gibberish. The witch hit the child, and the child died. The next day, the witch’s head disappeared. I was sad. Then the white wolf transformed into a beautiful woman. She told me to follow her, so I ended up doing exactly that.”

“...Kino, what kind of book were you reading last night?”

“How was it, Traveler?”

“How was what?”

“The book you just returned. You finished it, right?”

“Oh, yes. ...I enjoyed it.”

“What else?”

“What else?”

“Well, you know. How beautiful the sentences were, or how well the characters’ thoughts were conveyed. How would you approach the book from a critical standpoint? I’m sure your standards are different from those of us locals.”

“Er...it’s hard to say on the spot.”

“I see. Personally, I gave this one a 69 out of 100.”

“Right...”

“The protagonist was very well-written, but I took off some points because the supporting characters didn’t have much of an impact.”

“I see...”

“This author writes the most impeccable action scenes. If the protagonist kicks his enemy, for instance, you can practically hear his leg cutting the air. That’s one of the big draws here. But descriptions of nature, on the other hand, could use some work. The first half of the book uses the expression ‘blue skies

and flowing clouds' 13 times, word-for-word. It's very distracting."

"..."

"—Excuse me, I couldn't help but overhear. You have no idea what you're talking about. That's one of the author's charms. He doesn't need to waste time thinking of useless descriptions of nature. You don't understand the appeal of his prose, I see."

"Oh, really? Then how did you rate this book?"

"Ninety-two out of 100! One of the author's best works, I say."

"And I presume you have a good reason for making that declaration?"

"Er, excuse me..."

"Indeed I do! Even you must understand the masterful tension he builds in his prose, but that's not all. The author makes an art of depicting the pathos of the characters as they fight for survival."

"Ah, so that's where your focus was."

"Er... I'll be leaving now."

"Of course! You can't discuss this author without discussing his portrayal of pathos. I dare say that people who entertain themselves with shallow action sequences will never understand its true beauty. You do have a point about his descriptions of nature. That is indeed a weakness of his. But would flowery descriptions of nature have served him well in works like 'Let's Meet at Roul River'?"

"Hm. So you argue that any more exposition would slow the pace of the prose? 'Roul River' is quite the heavy choice of work, don't you agree?"

"Well, if you'll excuse me..."

"I'm sure you know that the author lost his father and uncle to war when he was still young. He discusses his experiences through the protagonist of 'Bobby and the Lemon'. 'Brau Frau Brau' also discusses what it means to kill in order to survive, through the perspective of the female boxer. The natural world that acts as the stage of the battles is given only the driest of description, while the internal thoughts of humans that experience sadness and grief are portrayed

realistically—with utter simplicity, as is his style—”

“In other words, in this particular work—”

“—also known as the ‘Real, Moral, Neutral’ technique pursued by authors who adhere to the so-called Tenderlens school of thought. This thesis—”

“—the series of deaths of the prominent supporting characters—”

“—a way of finding the root of Mother Nature—”

“—I see, so we are in agreement on that point. I admit, you do have a deep understanding of this novel.”

“Please, you flatter me.”

“In any case, Traveler— Hm? Where has she gone?”

“What did you think of ‘Reluta Tenson Rojijikonelsané’? Absolutely worth at least an 80 out of 100, no?”

“Eighty-nine, I’d say. The bedroom sequence in Act Two was what stuck out to me most—it’s an homage to ‘The Wheels Only Spin’. The author could not have matured as a writer without that scene. I even speculate that the bedroom scene is the whole reason he wrote the book in the first place. You can see similar tendencies in ‘Package 19’ and one of his early definitive works, ‘Gravity Breaks the Window at 45’.”

“Ah, a connoisseur! You can’t make that connection without a higher understanding of the author’s body of works. Have you read ‘Bolt Up *The Three-Forked Road of Fate*’?”

“Of course! I gave it an 88. It’s his best short story yet.”

“What of ‘Kellistonelltonès’? It’s a must-read.”

“Read that one five years ago, along with ‘Lulutonelltonès’. Have you read ‘So Said the Lamb’?”

“Naturally. ‘Tomohma Ledyatz *My Love Song*’?”

“The story of a generation. Who hasn’t read that one? What about—”

“I’m so bored...”

“Hm, so this is the luggage rack. And this here is...”

“Hey! Are you a motorrad thief?”

“Whoa! N-no, I’m...er...”

“Hi there.”

“Ack!”

“Welcome back, Kino. That was quick.”

“I saw you through the library window.”

“Er...”

“Let me introduce you, Mr. Thief. This here is Kino.”

“Hello. Sorry for scaring you. This is Hermes. And if you were planning on stealing him, I would advise against it. It would put me in a difficult position.”

“N-no, I just wanted to see him from up close. I’m terribly sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“Oh.”

“Are you interested in motorrads?”

“No, not particularly. Well, er...I just thought that I might be able to go on a journey if I had a motorrad of my own.”

“A journey?”

“Yes. I’ve always been curious about traveling, you see...”

“That’s certainly possible, if you know how to ride a motorrad.”

“No, I’m afraid I can’t. I don’t even know how to ride a bicycle. I’m terribly sorry. If you’ll excuse me...”

“Wait a second.”

“Yes?”

“It’s interesting that you’re interested in traveling. Are you planning to leave this country?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Ah, so do you really hate books a lot, Mr. Thief?”

“Not at all. I love books, and this is the perfect country for reading. I have countless works to choose from.”

“Oh, that’s kind of boring.”

“I agree—it’s great to have such a range of choices. And yet you still want to leave?”

“That’s right. ...Kino, do you have some time to spare? Let me tell you my story.”

“Of course. By all means.”

“The truth is, I’ve always dreamed of writing a book of my own. I want everyone to read my work. That’s why I want to leave.”

“But is writing not possible from here?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not surprising that you and Hermes don’t know, but no one in this country tries to write something for themselves. They simply read and consume the books. That’s why we have no publishing houses or printing presses.”

“Then where do the books come from?”

“Specialized merchants calling themselves ‘booksellers’ come to our land a few times a year with books from different countries. Everything we have comes from them. We have never published a single book within our walls.”

“Wow.”

“That’s incredible.”

“I...I’ve always loved losing myself in fantasies, ever since I was a child. Creating stories and controlling characters to my heart’s content. I would fantasize before I fell asleep, or in class while the teachers were talking.”

“I can relate.”

“Not me.”

“It was the same when I read. I enjoyed the act of reading for what it was, but that enjoyment sometimes acted as a catalyst for my fantasies. I call it an ‘idea overflow’. Even when I’m reading a book, I can enter another world in my mind—like crossing from one boat to another and rowing it in a different direction. Sometimes, I lose myself so much that I have to stop reading completely.”

“I can relate.”

“Not me.”

“Eventually, fantasizing wasn’t enough for me. I wanted to turn those fantasies—the stories I created—into sentences. Sentences that someone would read for me. I wanted someone to be moved the way I was moved, to find enjoyment the way I found enjoyment.”

“I see.”

“No comment.”

“That desire grew stronger and stronger. I think of myself as a container sometimes, and each time a new book enters me, it makes that container overflow with something else. The more I read the fun books other people have written, the more I want to write. It’s almost like wanting to respond to a fun tale with one of your own. Maybe it’s the conceit of having a better story to tell, or the jealousy of not having known that story before you were told it. Or maybe both.”

“I see.”

“My dream is to publish a book of my own. But no one else in this country shares that dream. I might be the most unusual person in these walls. Other people are perfectly content to read and enjoy and criticize already-published books, but why am I the only one who has the desire to write? One of my friends even asked me what the point of writing a book was.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“But what else can I do? My heart is crying out. I want to write. That thirst just won’t go away.”

“So that’s why you want to leave, even at the risk of getting hurt.”

“That’s right. I just might get the chance to fulfill my dreams if I leave, don’t you think? Perhaps somewhere out there, I’ll find someone who acknowledges my work or an organization that wants to publish my writings! But the problem is, I don’t even know where to begin with when it comes to traveling. Like I said, I don’t even know how to ride a bicycle.”

“...Here’s my suggestion.”

“Yes?”

“Just stay here forever. Then one day you might give up on writing and find contentment in reading for the rest of your life. You’ll tell yourself that this is your fate. At least that way, you won’t end up putting your life in danger.”

“...Of course... You’re right. Just stay here, huh? Lose my hold on the things I’ve created in my head... And someday, I’ll stop fantasizing altogether. I’ll forget how to overflow with ideas.”

“ ...”

“ ...”

“Hah hah! That’s a good idea! I can practically envision that life right now. It’s flashing before my eyes!”

“It’s definitely one way to live.”

“Of course! I can imagine that life. It’s almost like a ready-written book. Like reading a story that’s already been printed and bound.”

“That’s right.”

“I’ve imagined that future, and I know now! That I will refuse that fate! My destiny has not been categorized and shelved just yet! After all, at this moment! I am still a blank page!”

“ ...”

“ ...”

“Thank you for listening to me. I will think over this on my own again.”

“I see. Don’t dwell too much on what I said, though. You’ll end up just

thinking without taking any action.”

“Kino’s right. ‘Too much thinking means not enough going’.”

“Pardon?”

“You mean, ‘too much thinking means not enough doing’?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Good morning, Hermes.”

“Yaaaawn. Good morning, Kino. Hm...? Oh? Are we leaving?”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s still early.”

“I’ve had breakfast and I’m all packed. We might as well go.”

“No, I mean I thought you’d stay until evening to read some more.”

“I’m all right. Reading is fun, but books don’t tell you everything about a country. This place is really boring, aside from the books.”

“Hm. Anyway, I’m glad we’re leaving. The weather’s great today.”

“That’s all for exit procedures, Traveler. Thank you for visiting. Safe travels.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

“Let’s go, Hermes.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, there’s someone out there. Look at all the stuff he’s got.”

“That’s the man from yesterday. Let’s stop for a bit.”

“Hello Kino! Hermes!”

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

“There’s a fork up ahead. Shall we go there together?”

“Of course. What do you say, Hermes? Can I turn off the engine and push you

to the fork?”

“Sure thing.”

“I’m surprised that you left the country.”

“So am I, to be honest. I’m glad to see you, even if this is only a coincidence. As you can see, I’ve decided to leave on a journey.”

“I see. What did your friends and family say?”

“My parents were completely against it. They said it was a foolish idea and tried to stop me. So I wrote them a letter saying that I would never entertain foolish ideas again and snuck out in the morning.”

“Nice!”

“This letter is a work of fiction. It has no relation to any real promises’.”

“Hah hah hah! Yes, that sounds about right. Actually, I found some of my friends reading outside the library on my way out of town earlier. What do you think they said?”

“Tell us.”

““Why do you want to leave so badly? Our country is the greatest place in the world. We’ll always be here. Come back when you change your mind—hope we’ll see you again’.”

“I see...”

“So I told them that the next time we met, I wouldn’t hear their voices no matter how close I was. They could say whatever they want and give me as many or as few points as they want, but I wouldn’t be able to respond to them.”

“...”

“What’s so funny, Kino?”

“Nothing.”

“So no one told me to have a great journey. Although I don’t mind too much.”

“How are you going to travel?”

“That’s right. Are you going on foot?”

“I thought it over after we parted ways yesterday. I don’t know how to ride a motorrad or a bicycle, but I realized that there were other ways to take off. I have legs to walk on. And I’ve always been good at skiing. For now I’ll travel on foot—head south and go somewhere I can travel by ski when it snows. It’ll take some time, but that’s the most effective way for me to go. So for the time being, I have no idea what my destination is. I may never find one.”

“I see... The skis are an excellent idea.”

“You have so much stuff with you. What’s in the bag?”

“This long case is for my skis. And this backpack can double as a sled. I’ve got some clothes and portable rations inside, too. But more than anything else, I’ve packed a lot of papers. Half are works I’ve written so far, and the other half are blank.”

“I see.”

“Do you have a persuader?”

“Yes. I snuck out with the lightest one we had at home. Here.”

“Hm. Which one is this, Kino?”

“A Model 2340 with a laser sight. Bullets will be easy to come by anywhere. But make sure to always carry extra rounds, just like with rations. And take it apart to clean every day so you can fire at any time.”

“Right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And one more thing. Don’t hesitate to shoot, whether the animal you kill is edible or not. And above all, always prioritize your own safety. Dead men can’t write.”

“Right. ...I’ll keep that in mind.”

“The leaves are falling.”

“Yes. It will get colder soon.”

“So this is goodbye. I plan to follow the woods southward.”

“I see. Take care.”

“Bye.”

“Thank you, Kino!”

“What?”

“I have no idea what will happen to me now. But someday, when winter has passed, I will come back to my hometown. To give my old self courage.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Thank you for everything. I’m so glad I met you. Goodbye.”

“Safe travels.”

“Safe travels.”

“...Kino. Hermes.”

“Yes?”

“Hm?”

“Wish me luck!”

“—We’ll cross that mountain and head northwest. Then we’ll hit a highway.”

“All right. We have a heading. ...By the way, Kino.”

“Hm?”

“Do you think he’ll be all right?”

“...”

“Well?”

“Probably not.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Let’s say there are 10 people who have made up their minds on something. It’s rare that even one of them gets to achieve what he set out to do. So that man probably won’t be all right.”

“...”

“Statistically speaking, I mean.”

“...Kino. That’s what Master told you, word-for-word.”

“You got me. So anyway—”



Chapter 8: The Kind Country –Tomorrow Never Comes–



Bright colors were beginning to paint the landscape.

Trees dyed in reds and yellows filled the rolling mountain range, creating a mosaic in what was once a dark green forest.

The sky was a blinding blue. There wasn't a cloud to be seen.

A rain of red leaves was falling in the woods.

Through the woods ran a single path.

The dirt path was hardened and carpeted with leaves, winding up and down all over the mountain range.

A lone motorrad was traveling down the road. Like a ship cutting across the ocean surface, it left a wake of dancing leaves in the air behind it. The motorrad was moving slowly because of the sharp turns in the path.

The motorrad's rider was a young human in her mid-teens, who had big eyes

and fair features. The edges of her long brown coat had been wrapped around her thighs, and her goggles secured her hat onto her head.

A large bag was tied to the luggage rack behind the rider. Underneath it, on either side of the rear wheel, were small compartments.

“You know, Hermes,” said the rider to the motorrad. “The country we’re heading to now has a really bad reputation among travelers.”

“Really?” Hermes replied in surprise.

“It’s not just disinterest—they’re flat-out cold to outlanders. Someone even said that these people don’t know the meaning of the word ‘welcome.’ Or that they couldn’t think of one good thing about this country. That these people think they’re the center of the world.”

Hermes was stunned into silence.

“‘Unkind and unpleasant.’ ‘Kids throw rocks at you.’ ‘Shops close when travelers get near. Or everything goes out of stock.’ ‘They serve the worst food.’ ‘Careful you don’t get ripped off.’ Among other things.”

Hermes remained silent.

“‘Entry procedures take an entire day.’ ‘A textbook example of traveler hate.’ ‘They don’t even tell you how to get to a hotel. You’re better off camping in the streets.’ ‘Wouldn’t want to go near the place.’ ‘It’s better off being destroyed, the sooner the better.’”

“ ... ”

“Everyone tried to stop me when I said I wanted to visit,” the rider said with a smile. Hermes was astonished.

“And you’re still going to go, Kino? But there are lots of other places you could visit. You have all the freedom in the world.”

Kino chuckled. “Exactly. I want to see with my own eyes just how unpleasant this country really is. And who knows? Maybe their attitude’s gotten better.”

“What if it hasn’t?”

“That doesn’t matter. I’ll complain to my heart’s content once I’m out the

gates,” Kino declared.

“I guess that works,” Hermes mumbled.

Soon the path grew rugged and sloped. Kino looked down and saw the road behind her between the trees.

Then the road ahead disappeared. Kino stopped Hermes.

The road was dipping back down over the mountain. Beyond the crest to her right she spotted a grand U-shaped valley that sprawled all the way to the next mountain ridge. Nestled within was their destination, a country enclosed in grey ramparts.

“At least the view is nice,” remarked Hermes.

“Yeah. But the view doesn’t tell us anything about the people.”

“We’ll know when we get there. Who knows? It might end up being a country to remember,” Hermes joked. Kino smiled.

“I hope so.”

The motorrad began going down the gentle slope.

Several guard armed with rifle-type persuaders stood before the closed gates, as though having waited for Kino and Hermes. Kino slowed Hermes.

“I wonder if they’ll let us in.”

“What if they let me in but not you, Kino?” Hermes wondered.

Kino parked Hermes before the gate and went up to the guards, taking off her goggles. They stared at Kino and Hermes both.

Kino inhaled, ready to greet the men—

“How long will you be staying?” one of the guards demanded out of nowhere.

“Wow. Just like the rumors said,” Hermes mumbled to himself.

“Three days. I’d like to stay until the day after tomorrow,” Kino replied.

All tension drained from the guards. Putting on gentle smiles, they exchanged glances and stood up straight again. Without a single hand out of place, they saluted in unison.

“Welcome to our country, Traveler,” said the captain. “We are truly pleased to have you as our guest.”

Kino took off her hat, shocked. “Thank you. My name is Kino, and this here is Hermes.”

The guards finally lowered their hands.

“This way, please,” the captain said, leading Kino and Hermes not to the guardhouse but the main gates. Kino was once again floored.

“Don’t I have to go through entry procedures? You’re not going to check my belongings?”

“Not at all,” said the captain, smiling. “So long as long as you follow our country’s rules and customs, we will do no such thing.” Another guard entered the guardhouse, and the gates slowly opened. “Please, do go on. Our duties mandate us to remain outside the walls. Other people will be inside the gates; they will help you with anything you need.”

The guards again saluted as Kino and Hermes stepped into the country.

“That was surprisingly dull,” said Hermes. “Maybe we have the wrong country?”

“No, this should be the one,” Kino replied.

The inner gates began to open.

Kino and Hermes passed through the inner gates and entered the town proper.

Just inside the gates was a plaza. The people gathered there spotted Kino and greeted her. Soon, more and more people drew near with friendly smiles and surrounded Kino and Hermes. Without a single exception, the townspeople welcomed them. Not one glare or stone was cast in their direction.

“This has got to be a different country, Kino,” Hermes hissed.

“No, this is the right one. ...I think.” Kino replied, then raised her voice. “Thank you so much, everyone. I’m feeling a little overwhelmed by your welcome. Er...I have a question.”

The crowd went quiet to listen to Kino. She tensed and asked the people if there was an affordable hotel in the area equipped with showers and space for parking Hermes inside or on the premises.

People began suggesting different hotels and arguing over their choices. That was when a girl spoke up from behind the crowd.

“You’re welcome to stay at our place!”

The girl pushed through the crowd and stepped forward. She was about 11 or 12 years old, with short hair and big eyes.

Everyone stopped arguing and looked at the girl. She greeted Kino with a bow.

“Hello, Traveler. My name is Lily.”

“Hi there. My name is Kino. And this here is Hermes,” Kino replied with a smile. Hermes also greeted Lily.

Lily looked directly at Kino, her hands clasped politely. “My parents run a hotel. We’d love to have you stay with us. I’m sure you’ll love it too!”

Surprise rose to Kino’s face, before being replaced by a smile.

“That sounds wonderful. Could you take us there?” “Let’s go.” Kino and Hermes replied.

Lily beamed and nodded. “Thank you!”

Kino pushed Hermes along and followed Lily to the hotel. Along the way, she took off her coat and hung it over Hermes’ luggage rack. Under the coat she was wearing a black jacket and a belt around her waist, and a holster around her right thigh which housed Cannon, a revolver-type hand persuader.

“Kino,” Lily said, turning.

“Yes?”

“You have such a nice name. It sounds nice and it’s easy to say.”

“Thank you. I thought the same thing before,” Kino said. Lily seemed a little confused.

“Really? Then what about now?”

Kino smiled and met Lily's gaze. "I still think so. But 'Lily' is a nice name, too. What does it mean?"

"It's the name of a flower," Lily replied, embarrassed. "It's beautiful and white and blooms in spring and summer."

"Huh..." Kino mumbled.

Lily's face darkened. "But other kids tease me, calling me 'Silly' or 'Wily-nilly'. They're really mean."

Kino went silent, losing herself in thought.

"What's wrong?" asked Hermes.

"Nothing," Kino replied quickly. "I don't think I can explain."

Soon, they arrived at the hotel.

The hotel was not particularly large, but it was kept spic-and-span from top to bottom.

The couple sitting at the front desk greeted Kino and Hermes.

"Welcome. It's been a long time since we had outlander guests."

"Kino, These are my parents. They own and manage our hotel. They're also tour guides, too. I'm their star apprentice."

Kino greeted Lily's parents with a smile and introduced Hermes.

"Which room would you prefer?" asked Lily's mother.

Lily quickly glanced at the ledger. "Is the first-floor room with the big door still open?" Her mother nodded.

Lily led Kino and Hermes to their room. It was perfect for Hermes, with enough room for him to stand and a second door to push him out of without turning back to the main door. Kino expressed her pleasure.

"That's good to hear! It's almost lunchtime, so please come to the restaurant. It's the door with the big tree on it, on the right side of the front desk."

"Thank you. I'll be right there."

Once Lily was out of the room, Kino began unloading her things.

“That was pretty unexpected,” said Hermes.

“Yeah. I was surprised too.”

Hermes lowered his voice. “Or maybe this is all a ploy to make us feel welcome before turning on us. It might be a strategy to make us feel even worse.”

“That’s a lot of trouble to go through for something so petty. ...Oh well. I’m going to have lunch, Hermes. Then we’ll have a look around town and see if you’re right,” Kino said with a wry grin, and left the room.

After the delicious meal, Kino told the family that she would be going to have a look around town. Lily volunteered to guide her around free of charge. Kino accepted the offer with gratitude.

Detaching the compartments on either side of Hermes’ rear wheel, Kino asked Lily to bring a cushion. She placed the cushion on the luggage rack to create a makeshift seat, where Lily sat with her feet dangling on one side. Kino instructed Lily to cling tightly to her waist and warned her to not touch Cannon, which was still trapped to Kino’s thigh.

Their first destination was a repair shop for Hermes.

The middle-aged mechanic looked up from the car he was working on and gladly accepted Kino’s request. He gave Hermes a thorough look-over and pointed out the parts that needed repairs and maintenance.

“Hm? What happened here?” he asked, pointing at a part next to the engine with a missing screw. Kino hesitated, embarrassed.

“She shot it because the screw wouldn’t come undone,” Hermes tattled.

“You *shot* him?”

“It just wouldn’t come out, so Kino shot the tip with as little gunfluid as possible. I tried to stop her.”

The mechanic gave Kino an incredulous look. “That was very bold of you, Traveler, but I can’t recommend doing it again.”

“Right. I’m sorry,” Kino said.

“Scold her some more, Mister,” Hermes added, half-jokingly.

Soon a smile rose to the mechanic’s grease-covered face. “Well, this is going to be a repair job worth doing. Go on and have some tea with Lily while you wait, Traveler. And right this way, Hermes.”

“Thank you!” Hermes chirped.

Kino sat side-by-side with Lily on a bench in front of the repair shop, drinking tea. The sky was clear and the sunlight was warm on their skin.

“It looks like this mechanic is really meticulous and skilled. It’s unusual to see Hermes let someone work on him so easily.”

Lily looked up. “Thank goodness.”

“And it’s not every day I meet a mechanic who’s willing to scold his customer like that,” Kino added. Lily giggled.

That was when a townspeople drove by with his window open and gave Kino a cheerful wave.

“Welcome to our country, Traveler!”

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn.

Hermes had been made as good as new, and was still fast asleep. Kino left him there and went to a small park near the hotel. The sky was just as clear as the previous day. The high peak to the north of town was clearly visible.

Kino did her usual exercises in the park, starting with warm-ups before moving on to combat practice. Then she practiced her marksmanship with Cannon, which she had emptied beforehand.

She was wiping her sweat when a jogger came over and greeted her, smiling. Kino responded with a greeting of her own, and the man asked her what she thought of the country.

Kino confessed that she had heard nasty rumors about the land, but that she was pleasantly surprised by what she saw. The man gave a wry smile. “Yeah. We were pretty terrible back in the day.”

The man pointed at Cannon and asked if Kino had gotten it looked at recently.

When Kino shook her head, he referred her to a skilled persuader technician in the south part of town and drew her a simple map on the ground.

Kino thanked him. The jogger shook his head, still grinning. “It’s nothing—at least, compared to your coming to our country.”

With that, the man waved and departed.

“A persuader technician in the south? Sure. There’s a lovely park in the area, too,” Lily said with a nod when Kino asked her for more guidance after breakfast.

Kino thanked her. A mature look rose to Lily’s face.

“It is a guide’s duty to bring a smile to her customers.”

Like the previous day, Kino had Lily sit on Hermes’ makeshift rear seat. They went to a small persuader repair shop near the south wall. When Lily called loudly, a small, balding old man emerged from within.

“What is it? Store’s closed today. And tomorrow too, actually. Come back the day after,” he grumbled, having been woken by Lily’s voice.

“Kino here is a traveler,” said Lily. “And she’s going to be out of the country by the day after tomorrow. Could you please make an exception?”

The persuader technician gave her a curious look. “A traveler?”

Lily nodded. The old man cast Kino a cursory glance. “What model?”

When Kino pulled Cannon from its holster, a grave look rose to the man’s eyes. He gestured with his fingers for the persuader. After a long, serious stare, he finally broke his silence.

“All right. I’ll have a look at her, if you’re all right with someone like me.”

The technician instructed Kino to get him some spare parts. She thanked him and handed him what he wanted, along with several empty cylinders.

“She’s in rough shape, this one. I’ll start with the frame and switch out some of the parts if you’d like. There’s supposed to be a festival today, so go have a look around the park or something while I work. I’ll be done late in the afternoon.”

The technician reached for a persuader on the wall—a .45 caliber double-action revolver—along with several rounds affixed with crescent-shaped clips. “You probably won’t need it in this country, but think of it as a temporary replacement.”

The traveler, the motorrad, and their young guide left the store with a word of thanks. The old man looked at the traveler’s hand persuader.

“Incredible... Simply incredible. After all these years...”

The park was not too far from the repair shop. It was home to trees untouched by development and a pristine pond. Several small wooden homes dotted the area, and children ran around playing games.

There was an amphitheater in a corner of the park. It was crowded with people.

Kino, Hermes, and Lily arrived just in time to catch a performance.

Lily explained that this particular play was put on by the townspeople to teach children about the country’s founding. When Kino expressed her interest in history, Lily led her and Hermes inside.

When they stood in a line at the very back of the audience, the person in front of them noticed Kino and made way for them to move forward. So did the person in the next row, and the person in the row after that, all without hesitation. Eventually, Kino, Lily, and Hermes thanked their way through the audience and were given the best seats in the house, right at the center.

Kino apologetically took a seat. She left Hermes standing next to the row. The play was already underway, but the narrator suddenly stopped.

“Wait!” he cried. “Sorry—wait a second! Isn’t that the traveler who came to visit our country yesterday?”

All eyes on and off the stage fell on Kino. Lily rose from her seat. “Yes! This is the traveler, and I’m her guide. We’re here to watch the play.”

The people cheered. They even began applauding. Even the actors clapped and whistled.

“Well, we weren’t that far into the play anyway,” said the narrator. “And our

traveler won't get another chance to catch our story, so what do you say to starting the performance again from the beginning?"

Kino and Hermes looked around, stunned.

"Yeah!" "Good call!" people cheered all around them. One woman rose from her seat and cried, "make sure you catch my son's star performance this time! He's the third tree from the left!"

Everyone burst into laughter.

Kino stood and looked around, then nodded.

"All right, it's settled!" the narrator cried. The performers and crew got to work preparing to restart the play.

"That was surprising," Kino said to Lily, plunking down on the bench.

"Yeah," Hermes agreed.

"Welcome to our country!" Lily said, beaming.

The play began again.

It told the story of how the country was first founded.

Once upon a time, a group of people in a distant land had been persecuted and driven away. They drifted from place to place, but no one would accept them.

After years of wandering, they finally found themselves in a deep forest.

The bounty of the woods saved the tired, starving people. They decided to create a country of their own in the forest, where they would not be persecuted.

Countless generations passed since.

"That's how I'm here. I'm part of the newest generation of our people," Lily said quietly amidst the applause.

"Please join us for lunch, Traveler!"

Kino was flooded with countless lunch offers, and after some contemplation she finally decided to join the actors and crew for their barbecue party.

The party was held in the park. Kino offered to lend a hand, and someone asked her to start the fire. She did her job in the blink of an eye, and was quickly assigned to grill duty. Embarrassed, Kino put on an apron someone handed her and expertly cooked dozens of skewers on the grill.

“You look like you’re enjoying yourself,” Hermes said quietly.

After the party, Kino, Lily, and Hermes toured the park. Then they returned to the persuader repair shop.

“Done.”

The technician looked up and rose from his seat. He picked up Cannon, wrapped up in cloth on his workstation, and handed it to Kino.

“She’s a fine persuader. Take good care of her.”

“Thank you.”

Kino received Cannon and tested out its functions, cocking it and pulling the trigger. Her expression changed.

“Wow. It works even better than when I first got it.”

“Really?” the old man said brusquely.

“Thank you. How much do I pay?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

The old man sat down again and looked up at Kino.

“You’re a pretty good shot, aren’t you?”

“Well, I suppose.”

“I have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

“A long time ago, I knew someone who made her apprentice call her ‘Master’. She certainly was one, when it came to persuaders. This woman would travel from place to place; wouldn’t stop making trouble. She was so skilled that entire countries hated her or loved her. Mind you, this was a long time ago.

She'd be an old woman by now if she were still alive."

Kino said nothing.

"Do you by any chance know her?"

Kino holstered Cannon and looked the old man straight in the eye.

"I'm afraid not."

Slowly, the old man smiled.

"I see. Don't worry about the repair costs. And one more thing—"

The old man spun his chair around and grabbed a wooden case, which he handed to Kino.

"Open her up."

"Hm?"

Inside was a hand persuader.

A .22 caliber automatic model with a slender barrel. It must have been made for a left-handed shooter, as the safety, slide stop, and magazine were on the right side. The case also contained spare magazines and parts, a harmonica-shaped suppressor, a slide lock for attaching the suppressor, a cleaning kit, and a holster.

"Wow. I've never seen a persuader like this before."

The old man nodded. "His name was 'Woodsman', back when he was first born. The quintessential .22 caliber hand persuader."

"Wow. It's beautiful," Kino exclaimed, putting the persuader back in its case, when the old man surprised her.

"Take him. He's yours."

Kino looked up in shock. The old man continued.

"He used to be a traveling buddy, back in the day. Saved my skin more times than I can count. But he hasn't fired a shot in decades. I'm old, Traveler. I can't go out on a journey anymore. But Woodsman...he's still in fine shape. He's too good to rot here with me. I want him to get out there and see the world."

“I see. But—”

“Take him.”

“I...”

“You’ll take him, won’t you?”

“But I...”

“I insist.”

“...I understand. Thank you.”

The old man broke into a triumphant smile, like a man who had just won a bet. He leapt to his feet and raised his voice.

“Ha! That’s the spirit! Come inside, I’ll teach you how to use him. I’ll fix up the holster and the grip for you, too. Come on, we haven’t got all day!”

With surprising strength for an old man, the technician dragged Kino into the shop in the back of the store. Lily and Hermes were left confusion at the front.

“I’ll just call the front desk and tell them we’ll be a little late,” Lily said, going off to another store to use their telephone. Kino and Hermes waited for her on the street corner. Very few people were out and about, likely because it was evening.

“I didn’t think he’d make me shoot so many times,” Kino mumbled, holding the bag containing the wooden case.

The old man would not let Kino leave until she had fired about 300 rounds. While she practiced, he customized Woodsman’s holster so she could attach it to the back of her belt. And finally, he saw Kino, Hermes, and Lily off with a satisfied look on his face.

“Good for you, Kino. I almost died of boredom,” Hermes snapped.

“Sorry I kept you waiting. But this time it wasn’t my fault.”

“Sure.”

Kino held up the bag. “I wonder what I should do with this.”

“You got it for free. You might as well use it.”

“You make it sound so easy. Imagine what Master would say if she found out that I had a .22 caliber automatic.”

“You’ll never know, because she’d shoot you before that.”

Kino was silent.

“Just don’t let her find out,” Hermes said nonchalantly.

“You know, I always get the feeling that she’s watching me from somewhere.”

“Too bad. ...By the way, why didn’t you tell the old man about her?”

“Because Master told me not to tell if anyone asked,” Kino confessed.

“I see. She must have been worried about you,” Hermes replied.

“What in the world did Master do back then to deserve so much attention?”
Kino wondered to herself.

That was when Lily returned.

“Kino! Mom says she’ll push back dinner until we get back.”

“Thank you, Lily. Let’s get going,” Kino replied, about to start Hermes’ engine.
But Lily stopped her.

“Kino? Hermes? There’s a place I’d really like to show you. Now’s the only time we can see it. Can we please take a look before we go?”

“Sure. What do you say, Hermes?”

“Sure thing. Where are we going?”

“Somewhere spectacular!”

“Wow.” “It’s beautiful.” Kino and Hermes exclaimed in unison.

They stood with Lily at the top of the country’s ramparts. Lily had led them to a construction workers’ cabin at the base of the wall and taken them up on a cargo elevator.

The world was painted in hues of red and orange.

The sun slipped into the horizon as it lit the world aflame, glowing a dark and vivid red.

The overlapping ridges were clear in the distance. The sky began where the mountains ended.

“This is my favorite place in the entire country. There’s nothing more beautiful here. I’ve always wanted to guide customers to the ramparts someday. You granted my wish.”

“It’s an honor,” Kino replied, propping up Hermes by his stand.

For some time, the two humans and the motorrad looked up at the glowing sky.

Lily broke the silence.

“I want to follow in my parents’ footsteps someday and be a great hotel manager and guide. Do you think I can do it?”

“Without a doubt. In fact, you’re already a wonderful guide, Lily. Hermes and I had a great time yesterday and today,” Kino replied, smiling.

“Yeah. A great country like yours needs a great guide like you,” Hermes said, trying to sound sophisticated. Lily was surprised, but she quickly became embarrassed.

“Hee hee. Thank you, Kino. Hermes.”

Kino sat down on the ramparts and looked up at Lily. Lily watched the sun disappear and slowly spoke.

“I want to learn more. I want to become a better guide. And I hope more travelers would come to visit our country. I want to see them leave with unforgettable memories of my hometown.”

Beaming, Lily looked at Kino.

“Isn’t it so amazing that I get to do something like that?”

Kino looked up at Lily with a smile of her own, nodding again and again.

“Yeah. It really is,” she said, once more casting her gaze skyward.

After returning to the hotel, Kino had dinner with Lily, and Hermes slept in Kino’s room. After the meal, Lily’s mother served them tea and cake. When she asked Kino if Lily hadn’t caused any trouble, Kino replied that Lily had been a

wonderful guide. Lily preened.

“Kino,” asked Lily. “Isn’t traveling hard sometimes?”

“Yeah, it is,” Kino replied with a nod.

“But it doesn’t make you want to stop?” Lily continued as Kino sipped her tea.

“No. I’m going to keep traveling, even when things get hard.”

“Is that because traveling is something you have to do?”

Kino shook her head.

“No. It’s because traveling is something I *want* to do.”

With a satisfied grin, Lily brought her own cup to her lips. Several sips later, she changed the subject. “Kino, have you ever met someone you thought was really cool? Like you were destined for each other?”

Kino was taken aback for a moment. Her expression soured slightly. “Unfortunately, no. Although more than a few people have run away from me after I fired my persuader.”

They were laughing together when Lily’s parents finished up their work and came to sit with her.

“Lily,” said her mother. “If you’d like, you’re free to go traveling as well.”

“What?” Lily exclaimed, looking at her parents.

“You can travel like Kino, going from one place to another to learn about the world. And you can come back and become a guide when you’re a little older. It’s just a thought I had, Sweetie, when you brought Kino to stay with us.”

“Really?”

“What do you say, Honey?”

Lily thought for a moment, but quickly shook her head.

“It’s okay. I don’t want to leave. My dream is to stay here and study to become the best guide in the country. And I have the best teachers, too! Right, Mom? Dad?”

Her parents exchanged glances.

“...You’re right, Honey. You’re right. One of these days, you’ll become such a good guide that you’ll even put your parents out of work.”

Lily spoke before her mother could even finish.

“You bet!”

The family burst into laughter.

Kino watched as though it was all a scene out of another world.

The next day. It was the third day of Kino’s stay in the country. She did not rise at dawn.

The sun was shining quite high in the sky when Hermes woke up and—to his shock—found Kino still asleep. He loudly woke her up.

Kino leapt out of bed and looked out the window, despondent.

“What happened, Kino?” Hermes asked. Kino seemed just as surprised as he was.

“That’s funny. Am I sick or something?”

“There’s going to be a wedding in the area, Kino. Do you want to go have a look?” Lily—wearing an apron—asked as she took away Kino’s plates after her late breakfast.

Kino accepted the offer with ease and brought Hermes from her room.

Kino, Hermes, and Lily went to a nearby church. It was close enough that Kino could push Hermes there.

Standing in the center—showered with blessings from the wedding guests—were the bride and groom, both wearing subdued colors. They were very young, still only in their late teens.

“They’re marrying really early,” Hermes remarked. Lily also seemed a little surprised.

“Most people don’t get married until after 20. This is young even by our standards.”

The bride and the groom went up to the platform, carrying a large bag. The female guests crowded around before them.

“They’re going to throw a bunch of small pouches now,” Lily explained quickly. “Some of them have a seed inside. The number of seeds they toss is the number of children they want to have in the future. They say that if you go wake up in the morning, with a seed pouch in hand, you’ll become a happy bride yourself.”

Lily seemed to want to join the crowd herself. Kino stepped up.

“Would you like some help? I’m sure two sets of eyes and hands will be better than one.”

“Is that okay?” Lily asked, surprised.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

They joined the other women in the crowd.

“Hmph,” Hermes grumbled alone, when the bride and the groom raised their voices.

“We want to have five children!”

They began to toss the pouches. The women rushed to pick them up off the ground, checking inside and throwing aside the empty ones to find another.

Lily was pushing through the crowd in search of a seed pouch when Kino took her by the hand and pulled her out of the commotion. Kino held out a pouch.

“Here.”

Inside was a large seed.

“Wow! How did you find one so quickly, Kino?” Lily exclaimed in awe.

“I’ve always been pretty lucky,” Kino replied nonchalantly.

“Can I really have it?” Lily asked.

“Of course. Although I don’t think it’ll be enough to repay you for being such a wonderful guide.”

Lily shook her head vigorously. “It’s more than enough, Kino! I’ve never found a pouch with a seed before. Thank you so much!” Lily cried, clutching the pouch.

“You’re welcome,” Kino replied.

When they returned to the hotel, they were greeted by several unarmed guards. They waited for Kino to approach before saluting in unison.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to depart the country now, Traveler,” one of them said.

Kino thought for a moment. “Er...would it be all right for me to extend my stay for a couple of days?”

Lily looked at Kino in shock. Hermes was equally stunned. “What’s gotten into you, Kino?”

“Er...I just felt like it. Was that really so surprising?”

“Our humblest apologies, Traveler,” said the guard, dignified. “But you specified at the start of your visit that you would only stay for three days. Rules are rules. We ask you to respect them.”

Reluctantly, Kino began preparations.

She refueled Hermes and bought portable rations. The store was run by a stoic middle-aged woman, who sold everything to Kino for practically nothing.

“Is this really all right?”

“Of course. We can’t rip off a traveler. But in return, promise me that you’ll promote my store to other travelers. Tell them to get everything here. Tell them it’ll bring them good luck,” the woman said with a wink. It was not a particularly charming one.

Kino and Hermes returned to the hotel to pack. Lily, her parents, and the guards from before were waiting at the front desk.

“You’re heading west? Then you’ll be best off camping on that ridge. The ridge ahead of that one is brittle and could collapse—the one ahead of that drops off into a very steep slope,” said Lily’s father.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right,” said a guard, drawing Kino a simple map. “This ridge here is perfect for camping—there’s even a little pond a little ways down, and the view is marvelous.”

Then it was Lily’s turn. “Here, Kino.” She handed Kino two packages.

“It’s our traditional picnic food,” said Lily’s mother. “Lily and I packed it together. Have the smaller package for dinner tonight, and the bigger one for breakfast. It’ll keep for a while.”

Kino received the packages and turned to everyone gathered there.

“Thank you for everything. Thank you so much.”

Then she took Lily’s hand in a handshake.

“Thank you, Lily. I’ll never forget the time I spent here.”

Lily’s grip tightened in Kino’s hand.

“You’re welcome.”

Hermes was fully loaded, and Kino was in her coat. They stood in the plaza by the western gates. Like when they arrived, they were greeted by a large crowd.

“Than you, everyone,” Kino said to them. “I’ve been to many countries in my travels, but I’ve never seen such kindness and generosity anywhere else.”

The people in the plaza broke into smiles. They began applauding.

Lily squeezed through the crowd in spite of her small stature and gave Kino a courteous bow.

“Thank you so much for visiting our country, Kino. Hermes. I hope you’ll come visit us again, on a honeymoon with the person you love. I’ll make sure to prepare the best room in the house for you,” she said proudly, in that moment a full-fledged hotel manager in her own right.

Kino smiled.

“Yeah. I’ll come back someday. I promise.”

The cheering of the crowd swept over them like a wave.

“Please come again!” Lily said, her tiny hand waving in the air.

Kino turned back, still with a smile. She pushed Hermes along as they left the walls. She did not look back once.

Once they were past the gates, Kino started Hermes’ engine. The guards came to see her off.

“Safe travels.”

Kino took off her hat and thanked the guards. Then she started Hermes as the guards saluted her once more.

The guards watched the traveler depart, their hands refusing to fall until the motorrad was completely out of sight.

“I’m surprised, Kino. You never stay longer than three days anywhere,” Hermes said as they traveled through the forest.

“I surprised myself,” Kino replied, shifting to a lower gear. “But this is for the best. If I’d stayed longer, I might have never wanted to leave. I might have ended up settling down.”

“Wow. I thought hell would freeze over before you even thought of settling somewhere.”

“Well excuse me,” Kino chuckled.

Hermes’ tone fell. “It was a great place.”

“It sure was.” Kino nodded.

“...The rumors weren’t true at all,” Hermes said out of the blue.

“Yeah.”

“I wonder why.”

“At first I wondered too, but by the end I just didn’t care,” Kino said, satisfied. “If other travelers ask me about this country, I’m going to tell them that it was a kind and wonderful place.”

It was evening by the time they reached the ridge Lily’s father and the soldier told them about. Kino decided to set up camp there.

She strung a rope between Hermes and a tree and set up a canvas overhead in case of rain. Then she laid out a blanket and her sleeping bag underneath.

Inside the smaller of the packages from Lily was roasted fowl, cooked to perfection. Kino did not leave a crumb behind.

Then she brewed tea with water from the nearby pond. Kino looked eastward with her cup in hand.

The full moon rose from beyond the ridges and cast a dim blue light on the world. In the distance Kino spied manmade lights. Lily's home.

She raised her cup as though in a toast.

After finishing her tea, Kino left the rest to Hermes. She put on her jacket and crawled into her sleeping bag, still in her boots.

The full moon was at the highest point in the sky.

Kino opened her eyes and quickly sat up.

"Something wrong, Kino?" asked Hermes. "Everything's okay. No animals, and the weather seems all right too."

"I can't sleep," Kino said, crawling out of the sleeping bag and standing next to Hermes.

"Maybe it's because you slept in?"

"No," Kino asserted stiffly. "Something's wrong. It feels like I'm chewing on sand." She pulled Cannon from its holster.

"W-what's wrong?" Hermes stammered, but Kino did not reply. She simply looked around, wary.

The sky was a deep purple. The ridges of the mountain range were clear in the distance. The lights in the east must have belonged to someone staying up late in Lily's country.

"I don't feel anything off. You're just too much on edge, Kino." Hermes said with the naïveté of a new recruit on the front lines, when the ground suddenly shook. Then there was a dull roar.

A black mass rose up from partway up the great peak in the north. It ballooned like a summer stormcloud, the difference being that it was rising not from the sky but the mountain itself.

The mass expanded for a time before collapsing, licking its way down the ridge.

Soon the flowing mass swallowed the little lights in the east.

"What in the world...? What is that?!" Kino cried, taking aim with Cannon.

“Pyroclastic flow,” Hermes said quietly.

“Pyro— what?” Kino demanded, turning. Hermes continued mechanically.

“Pyroclastic flow. It’s when volcanic ash and molten lava erupt out of a volcano and rush down the slope like a tidal wave.”

“You mean, like a tidal wave?”

“Yeah, that.”

Hermes said no more.

The lava continued to flow down the valley. Kino’s gaze was on the lost lights.

“If I go there now, do you think I can do anything to help?”

“No,” Hermes declared.

Kino could not say a word.

“That lava is nearly 1,000 degrees celsius. Hot enough to kill a person in an instant. All your blood boils away in the blink of an eye and you die of shock. They probably didn’t even have the time to run. There’s nothing you can do, Kino. You’ll just get yourself killed too.”

Kino stood in a daze.

As the rumbling continued, echoing into the distance, she collapsed powerlessly to her knees.

Some time later, silence returned to the world.

Yet more time passed, and by the time the smoke cleared from the valley, the moon was disappearing westward and the sky in the east was growing bright. Kino was still sitting there with Cannon in hand. She said nothing, and Hermes did not ask a single question.

Once the world was bright again, the mosaic patterns of the sky and the forest regained their colors, with one exception. The valley that once housed a country was now a splash of grey.

Kino rose, holstering Cannon.

Without a word, she took down the canvas and folded up her blanket and

sleeping bag. Then she took out the larger of the two packages from Lily's family.

"We'll leave after breakfast," Kino said, and opened up the package from atop Hermes. Inside was hard bread and salted meat.

Kino ate her food in silence. And just as she folded up the package to put it away, she spotted an envelope and a smaller package inside.

Inside the envelope was a letter. It was labeled with the names of the sender and the recipients.

"This is from Lily's mother. It's for me and you, Hermes."

"What does it say?"

The sky had largely cleared. Kino read the letter aloud.

Dear Kino and Hermes,

The final visitors to our country.

By the time you read this letter, we will no longer be of this world. We and our country will have been swallowed by lava and buried in ash.

Perhaps you saw it all happen before your eyes.

It was precisely one month ago that we learned of the mountain's impending eruption.

Our scholars found that an unprecedented eruption would occur, swallowing our country whole.

We had two options. To abandon our country or remain.

And we made our choice. We would stay with our homeland.

It may seem foolish to a traveler like you, but this is our home. We were born and raised in this land. We know of no other way of life. Perhaps we never had a choice to begin with, in that sense. But even still, we do not think ourselves miserable for it.

After the discovery, the people of our country felt a sense of release. We began to think of how we could spend our remaining days to the fullest. Without cursing our fate, or getting angry or sad, we remained true to our lives to the

end.

But we soon came to a heartbreaking realization. That after our departure, the only people who would remember us would be outlanders—travelers like you.

You may or may not already know this, but until that point we had been very rude to travelers. We had offended them without a shred of guilt.

And we realized that we would be remembered only as a loathsome, unwelcoming land.

So the people of our country decided that we would do everything we could to welcome whoever came to visit before the eruption. We would do our best to leave happy memories of our home.

Unfortunately, not a single traveler came to us since our realization. Perhaps it was because rumors of our rudeness had spread far and wide.

Time continued to pass mercilessly. Everyone had given up hope. But three days before the eruption, you came to us.

We welcome you on behalf of everyone in our country.

Kino, Hermes, thank you. Thank you so much for coming to us.

P.S.

I wasn't sure whether or not to tell you, but there is something I want you to know.

Only citizens who have reached the age of 12—the age of majority—know the truth. The day after the eruption—today, for you—happens to be Lily's 12th birthday.

When my husband and I saw you having so much fun with her, we considered getting you to take her with you when you left. But last night, she told us that she wished to become a guide like us in our homeland. And if that is her wish—selfish though it may be—we would like to take her with us.

Thank you for reading to the end.

"I see. I understand now," said Hermes.

Kino remained silent in thought for a time, the letter still in her hands.

It was a little later that her low voice broke the silence.

“This is...this is so selfish. It’s too selfish of them.”

“Maybe,” said Hermes. “But there’s nothing you can do about it now. I couldn’t take two riders, anyway.”

Kino folded up the letter and put it back in the envelope, then picked up the small package. Inside was a neatly-folded letter and a tiny pouch. The pouch kino had picked up at the wedding and given to Lily. The seed was still inside.

Kino’s eyes darted to the letter.

Dear Kino,

I don’t think

Kino froze mid-sentence. She stood still, her eyes wide, but Hermes urged her to continue. She went through the rest of the letter in one breath.

Dear Kino,

I don’t think I’ll ever need this. Please keep it.

Goodbye.

Please don’t forget us.

From Lily

Kino exhaled and looked up at the sky.

She did not move for a very long time.

Eventually, she put the letter and the pouch in her bag.

At the same time, Kino took out the box she had received from the persuader technician. She strapped the holster to the back of her belt.

Then she loaded the tiny rounds into the magazine, put some in one of her pouches, and loaded one into Woodsman as well. She armed the safety and stuck it in its holster.

Woodsman stuck out behind Kino, a new addition to her attire.

“Looks good,” Hermes said. Kino smiled.

She loaded her things onto Hermes and started the engine. It rumbled cheerfully and filled the woods with noise.

Then Kino put on her coat and her hat, and hung her goggles around her neck. That was when the sun began to emerge. The greens and yellows and reds of the forest regained their vibrant colors. Kino narrowed her eyes and pulled up her goggles. The light reflected against the lenses hid her expression.

“It was a wonderful place,” said Hermes.

“Yeah. It really was. It was perfect.”

Kino straddled Hermes.

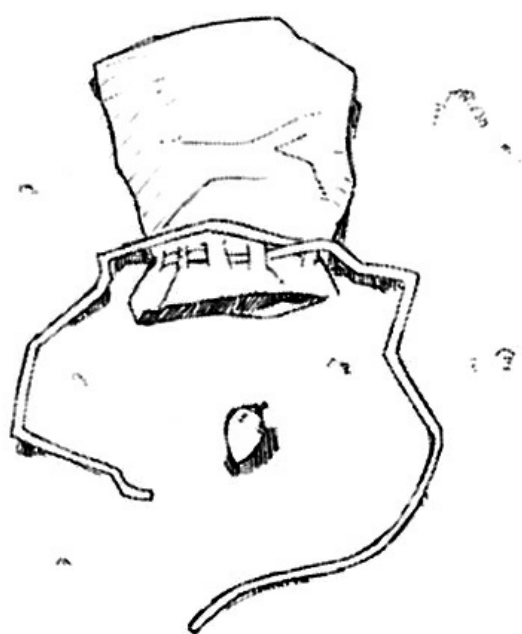
“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

Looking back just once at the grey valley, Kino saw the land buried in ashes.

Then she went forward.

When the motorrad disappeared, the world was once again enveloped in stillness.



Epilogue: In the Middle of the Desert • A –

Beginner's Luck • A–

In the middle of a desert covered in rocks and sand, Kino looked up at the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight.

Then she looked down at a stone well. There wasn't a drop of water.

Bitterly, she shook her head.

"What did I tell you? This traveling thing isn't going to work out, from the way things have started," Hermes said from behind Kino, who was in a white shirt and a black vest.

Kino looked into the pitch-black well.

"What to do?" she mumbled.

"There's not much you *can* do," Hermes said quickly. "It's not too late. Let's go back to Master."

Kino shook her head firmly. "No."

"You might die out here."

Kino shook her head again. "I know. But I don't want to go back."

"You really are stubborn. ...I get how you feel, but you can't keep going without water. It's up to you whether you dry up and die, but what about me? I don't want to be buried in the sand with your mummified body, Kino."

"I don't want to become a mummy, either. And..."

"And?" Hermes asked. Kino slammed her hands onto the sides of the well and screamed into its depths.

"Why?! Why is this well dry?"

"What goes around comes around. Or the god of travel is trying to say that you've reached your limits. Maybe."

Kino wiped the sweat off her brow.

“Whew. I worked up a sweat from all that shouting. I’m thirsty, too.”

“Then should we go back?” Hermes suggested slyly.

“No.”

“...You’re so stubborn, Kino. If you’re going to die, I’d prefer you did somewhere there’s another rider to take me.”

“That’s probably not going to happen,” Kino said, taking out a rope from her things.

“Are you going to hang yourself?” asked Hermes.

Kino strung the rope between the well and Hermes, set up a canvas, and lay in its shade.

“Kino, are you awake? Are you even alive?” Hermes asked. Kino’s reply was feeble.

“I’m awake. Alive too.”

“You’d better make a choice fast, or it’s gonna be too late.”

“Yeah.”

“You have two options. Somehow get back to Master with the water you have left and get the scolding of a lifetime for taking off like you did. Or die out here in the desert.”

“I don’t like my options.”

Kino sat up and stepped out of the shade.

There was a gust of wind, and a wave of dust.

“Kino, the most important thing for a traveler to have is decisiveness. That goes for both newbies and experts.” Hermes argued calmly.

Kino said nothing, putting on her coat and taking down the canvas before covering Hermes with it.

“Kino?”

Hermes couldn’t see a thing. Kino replied with a grin.

“No, Hermes. The most important thing for a traveler to have...is luck.”

At that moment, a droplet of water plopped against the canvas.

The sound was soon joined by many others like it, creating a beat and growing into an endless rhythm.

It was raining.